

NINTH WAVE

By Bi Ru Xie

Bi Ru Xie Publishing

The Breakthrough Novel by a 20-Year-Old Prodigy

A gripping tale of ambition, danger, and survival
in the face of overwhelming odds.

A young genius confronts the greatest challenges of his life.

The ninth wave

Love, Delusion, and Survival during the Cultural Revolution

Bi Ruxie

Preface

This novel was written out of memory, reflection, and the desire to understand youth in a time of uncertainty.

It tells the story of a generation standing at the edge of change—caught between ideals and reality, innocence and experience, order and chaos.

At its heart, *Nine-Level Waves* is not only a story about love, but about loss, awakening, and the search for meaning in a shifting world.

Some events may seem distant, others uncomfortably close.

But all belong to the same question:

What does it mean to grow up, when the world itself is unstable?

— Bi Ruxie

Paste your preface here...

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Chapter 1

Life is a bow.

The bowstring is dreams.

But where is the archer?

—Romain Rolland

Before Sima Li was born,

her biological father—

a man of considerable prestige

in democratic political circles—

issued a stern command to her mother:

“Listen carefully!

I only want a son.

If you wish to stay here,

you must give birth to a boy.”

Sima Li’s mother,

around fifty years old,

was a gentle and obedient cook.

For years,

she had submitted

to the whims of this political figure.

At that time,

the New Democratic Revolution

was approaching its final victory.

The People's Liberation Army

had surrounded Beijing from all directions.

Fu Zuoyi's forces were doomed.

Escape was impossible.

Millions in the city

awaited liberation

with anxious excitement.

Yet inside this grand,

heavily guarded mansion,

the oppressive atmosphere

and cold order

remained unchanged.

Despite her pregnancy,

the cook still bent low,

bowing with effort,
her voice muffled:

“Yes... sir... yes...”

Master Sima,
nearing sixty,
was still vigorous
like a young man.

Narrowing his eyes,
watching her struggle,
he declared:

“If it’s a boy,
you and the child may stay.

If it’s a girl—
you both leave.”

He saw no need
for further words.

Sima Li
was born a girl.

**The exhausted mother,
clutching the newborn,
fainted.**

**Soon after,
Beijing was peacefully liberated.**

The world changed.

**Women and children
were now protected by law.**

**Sima Li and her mother
were not expelled after all.**

**They remained in the household,
living a materially comfortable life.**

**I recently heard this story
from an old woman surnamed Gou,
after returning from the countryside.**

**She told it simply,
but I imagine**

it must have unfolded just like this.

Old Madam Gou
and Sima Li's mother
had both served
in the Sima household
since their youth.

Decades of servitude
had shaped in her
a complete philosophy of submission—
utterly incompatible
with normal human dignity.

Now she worked as a nanny
in my neighbor's home.

Every evening after dinner,
she would come over
and recount her experiences
in the mansion—

with a peculiar pride
in what should have been shameful.

She praised Master Sima's strength,
his vitality,
speaking without restraint
of sordid details.

“One night,
Master Sima came into my quarters
past midnight,
holding a string of jewelry—
meant for me...”

I interrupted her:

“Please, stop.
Let's talk about something else.”

So she told me the story above,
then left.

Sima Li
is now working in the countryside
with me.

A letter from her
lies at my side.

I open it
and recognize
her familiar,
tiny handwriting.

She first describes the autumn harvest.

Then she writes:

“Yongren has been very busy
guarding the crops.

He asked me to send you his regards.

His sister, Yongzhen,
recently joined a mobile medical team
and is treating children in our village.

I share a kang bed with her,
and we exchange our thoughts.

She says that since coming to the countryside,
her spirit has been completely renewed.

Labor has infused her life
with new passion.

Through working alongside
the poor and lower-middle peasants,
I too have changed.

People say
I am no longer the same as before—

no more empty melancholy
or meaningless distress.

I will strive to reform my worldview,
to be like Comrade Lei Feng,
‘devoting my limited life
to the infinite cause
of serving the people.’

Ideological reform
may have setbacks,
but this direction
must never change...”

I agree with her.

Toward the end of the letter,
she adds:

“I’m writing this during the noon break.

The landlord keeps several dogs—
both male and female.

They’re lying under the eaves now,
panting,
their tongues flat and foul-smelling.

We used to be no better
than pigs and dogs...”

Is that a fair judgment?

I shake my head.

Memories return vividly.

My alma mater
was a very peculiar middle school.

Originally an elementary school,
it had later been converted
into a junior high.

The same teachers
continued teaching,
unchanged.

One can imagine their level.

Many decayed remnants
of the old intellectual class lingered there:

former private tutors
from the Qing dynasty,

clerks from Zhang Xun's regime—

filling positions
they scarcely deserved.

One middle-aged P.E. teacher
claimed he had placed third
in a national marathon
in the early years after liberation.

**Whether this was true,
no one knew.**

**Now he limped
even while walking.**

**The students
were no better.**

**Delinquents
who had failed entrance exams elsewhere,
dropouts returning after years,
so-called “social youth”
trying to reform themselves—

all gathered here.**

**Most were rustic
and showed little interest in study.**

**Within a single class,
age differences
could be enormous.**

Nearby residents
regarded students from our school
as hooligans.

They dared not hang laundry outside
or provoke them in any way.

Later,
a young official
from the education bureau
became principal.

He acted decisively—

forcing several idle senior teachers
into retirement,
and expelling more than a dozen troublemakers,
regardless of their parents' pleas.

After curbing the worst tendencies,
he imposed strict schedules,
separated male and female students,
and recruited a new batch
of capable students.

I was among them.

**The new principal
admired Kairov's pedagogy—**

especially the maxim:

**“Without punishment,
there is no education.”**

**He loved to lecture
and had a sharp command
of Beijing slang,
scolding students
with intimidating authority.**

**Under his leadership,
the school did improve.**

**Yet beneath the surface
lay a hidden crisis.**

**Then—
came the movement.**

A few summers later,
during the Cultural Revolution,
the principal's authority collapsed.

The school emptied.

No one was truly a student anymore.

Everyone followed their own logic,
drifting,
transforming.

Only Yongren and I
remained in the dormitory.

Yongren
was the son of a martyr.

With only an older sister,
he had always boarded at school.

He had once been
an excellent student
at a top institution.

**But one day,
while listening to a storytelling performance,
he imitated a hero
and tripped his teacher.**

**From then on,
the teacher held a grudge.**

**Yongren transferred
to our school.**

We became inseparable.

**He was striking in appearance—
strongly built,
calm,
resilient.**

**His features were rugged,
but not crude.**

**His movements
were controlled,
precise.**

At times,
he made sharp,
thoughtful remarks.

Whenever I looked at him,
I thought of Zhou Yu—
a refined general
in his prime.

In class,
Yongren often asked questions
that left teachers speechless.

Though not widely read,
he understood deeply.

After reading Makarenko,
he wrote an essay titled:

“There Are No Bad Children—
Only Bad Methods of Education.”

The teacher dared not grade it.

It was passed to the principal.

Rumor had it
the principal was furious—
yet helpless.

After the movement began,
Yongren stayed on campus.

To keep him company,
I moved into the dorm with him.

We set up bunk beds.

The room was on the second floor.

Outside the window
stretched a broad street,
though no vehicles passed.

Yongren went astray.

He became busy—
often going out to loot
and returning with spoils.

He had a group of companions.

**Each time,
he contributed the most
yet took the least.**

They respected him greatly.

**One day,
he brought back several leather coats.**

“Bring your household registration booklet,” he said.

“Let’s go to the consignment store.”

**Seeing my hesitation,
he waved his hand.**

**“Forget it.
I’ll find someone else.”**

**A few days later,
he bought decorations
and arranged the room.**

Occasionally,

he gave me money.

He never explained
where it came from.

Meanwhile,
I followed my own path.

Every day,
I kept a strict study routine.

I rose early,
ran laps,
exercised.

After breakfast,
I read—
philosophy,
then literature.

I even studied nutrition,
calculating calories,
adjusting intake.

After long hours,

**I would look out the window
to rest my eyes.**

**Across the street
lay a vast residential area.**

Ordinary people lived there—

**arguing over small things,
over money,
over daily life.**

Family bonds were thin.

Conflicts erupted easily.

**These were
the petty citizens of society.**

I observed everything from above.

**In my spare time,
I wrote fiction.**

My experience was limited.

**My stories were simple,
lacking depth.**

Yet I persisted.

Writing brought joy.

**With pen and paper,
one could travel anywhere.**

**Still,
whenever I stopped,
I felt something missing.**

A quiet emptiness.

**One day,
I noticed a pale,
slender girl
who often passed beneath our building.**

She stood out.

Always alone.

Always walking.

Each time,

I watched her

until she disappeared.

If she failed to appear,

I felt a quiet loss.

Then I understood.

Within me,

a longing had formed.

Clear.

Golden.

I was seventeen.

Yongren spoke of such matters.

He said a new trend had emerged—

boys and girls

meeting randomly on the street,
forming fleeting relationships,
using false names.

He called them
“lying lovers.”

I laughed.

He told me:

“If you want to find them,
go to Xidan.
They wander there every day.”

I never could.

Instead,
I studied more,
wrote more,
trying to improve myself.

I believed
love would come
only to a mature man.

Days passed.

**Like a quiet stream,
life moved forward.**

**And within it,
I gathered strength—**

for the future.

Chapter 2

One morning in July,
Yongren called out to me:

“Lu Zi—
let’s go to my sister’s place today.
Feng Ming just got back from Harbin.”

Feng Ming was his brother-in-law.

Both he and Yongzhen had once been top students at medical school.

Later, for reasons unclear,
Yongzhen stayed in a children’s hospital,
while Feng Ming was assigned to the Northeast.

Because of this,
his annual home visits felt like holidays.

I knew them fairly well.

I jumped out of bed.

“Really?”

Yongren replied calmly,

“No rush.

I’ve arranged to meet Lao Wu this morning.

We’ll go together.”

Lao Wu was a young pickpocket.

His name was well known:

Wu Xinghao.

Once,

while Yongren was shopping,

he suddenly felt a hand slipping into his pocket.

Without hesitation,

he grabbed the thief’s wrist,

turned around,

and locked eyes with him.

He didn’t shout.

Instead,

he quietly twisted and squeezed the man’s hand

until the thief dared not make a sound.

After ten minutes,
Yongren let him go.

He learned his name and address,
but instead of turning him over to the authorities,
he settled the matter privately.

From then on,
Yongren would regularly demand money from him.

I hesitated.

“There’s no point in me going.
I don’t understand this kind of thing.”

“You don’t understand
because you’ve never done it,” Yongren said.

“Just follow me.
It’s easy.”

They had arranged to meet
at the Shatan tram stop.

Wu Xinghao was thin—
so thin it seemed no amount of good food
could ever nourish him.

He wore a crisp white shirt
that didn't quite fit his sloping shoulders.

There were iodine-stained swellings on his arms.

He came up to greet us warmly.

Yongren stepped close
and spoke to him in a low voice,
using terms I couldn't fully understand.

Wu patted his flat chest.

“No problem!
I'll treat you—
tram ride's on me!”

But despite his bravado,
he hesitated to board.

It was still early.

The tram was full of workers heading to their jobs.

**They carried no cash—
only monthly passes and meal coupons.**

Better to wait.

Just wait a bit longer...

Yongren lost patience.

**At that moment,
a No. 3 trolleybus from the zoo pulled in.**

**Yongren kicked Wu lightly from behind,
signaling him to board through the middle door.**

Wu muttered:

**“Diving headfirst into a washbasin—
you don’t know how deep it is.”**

The bus was crowded.

As soon as I got on,
my heart began to pound.

It felt as if I were the one
about to do something wrong.

I forgot to watch Wu
and instead tried to shrink into a corner.

Yongren,
on the other hand,
was composed.

He acted as if he didn't know Wu at all,
standing a few passengers away,
quietly watching his every move.

Wu straightened his clothes,
adopting the air of a professional.

His sharp,
restless eyes
scanned the surroundings.

I grew bored—

and regretful.

Passengers pushed and squeezed past me.

Several times,

I accidentally stepped on someone's foot.

Each time,

there were loud complaints,

drawing attention from everyone nearby.

Perhaps this was exactly

the kind of chaos Wu needed.

I lowered my head

and silently reviewed what I had read the day before.

The bus stopped at Dengshikou for a longer time.

Seven or eight female middle school students boarded.

They were dressed in bright colors

and carried themselves with a careless boldness.

There was a notoriously disreputable girls' school nearby,

and it was said that many of its students
brought a kind of moral decay into society.

These girls must have come from there.

They were loud,
laughing,
clinging to one another,
stomping on the floor.

Some of them noticed Yongren's striking appearance.

Almost instinctively,
they adopted flirtatious poses,
casting glances in his direction.

Yongren either didn't notice—
or pretended not to.

His eyes remained fixed on Wu.

One girl with a pockmarked face,
however,
seemed more interested in Wu's fine clothes.

I didn't want to look at them anymore
and tried to push forward.

Wu,
meanwhile,
drifted closer to them.

Soon enough,
he struck up a conversation with the pockmarked girl.

"The last stop of the No. 3 bus is Beijing Station," he said,
answering a question before the conductor could.

The people around him responded warmly.

Yongren moved in as well,
staying close behind him.

I continued moving forward—
then suddenly froze.

The pale girl
who often passed beneath our building
was sitting across from me.

She seemed completely untouched
by the surrounding noise.

Her head was slightly lowered.

Her clothes were still simple.

There was something distant,
almost noble,
about her.

The world around her
didn't seem to exist.

I stared at her,
unable to control myself.

I forgot entirely why I was on the bus.

I pushed aside an old man blocking my view
and stood about five feet away,
gazing at her in a daze.

A thought crossed my mind—

Should I go up and speak to her?

No.

I didn't dare.

**Her gaze was soft,
unfocused.**

**If only she would lift her eyes
and look at me...**

**Using the reflection in a pair of dark glasses across from me,
I checked my own face.**

I wasn't unattractive.

**In her hand,
she held a charcoal pencil.**

A sudden shame rose in me.

**Here I was,
associating with someone like Wu Xinghao,
waiting to stain my own conscience**

with dirty money.

My face burned.

Several times,

I almost shouted out—

almost exposed Wu in front of everyone.

But I said nothing.

Then Yongren signaled for me to get off.

With reluctance,

I cast one last glance at her.

We got off at Dongdan.

Standing at the busy intersection,

Wu complained:

“What are you doing?

I’m not finished yet...”

Yongren cursed at him

and dragged him through a noisy market

into a quiet alley.

There,

Wu took out a light-colored women's wallet
from inside his clothes.

It was empty.

Inside,

there was only a medical slip
with the words:

Congenital Heart Disease.

The patient's name:

Sima Li.

Age:

17.

The name struck me—

ancient and modern,

oddly mismatched.

“Where's the money?”

Where's the cash?" Yongren demanded.

Wu looked miserable.

"There was a girl by the window...

holding a pencil...

like a statue.

I worked so hard to get it—

but it was empty..."

I was furious.

Yongren stared at him,

then suddenly punched him hard across the face.

Wu collapsed like a scarecrow.

He immediately curled into a defensive position—

legs together,

hands protecting his head,

chest down.

It was the posture

of an experienced pickpocket being beaten.

I hated him—

but seeing how thin and fragile he was,

I couldn't bring myself to strike him.

Yongren pulled him up

and pinned him against a pole,

pressing a leg into his stomach.

“Seven tonight.

Dongdan.

If you don't come through...”

He made a striking gesture

instead of finishing the sentence.

Wu ran off.

We took another bus

to Feng Ming's home.

Yongren explained that experienced pickpockets

always had clever ways of hiding money.

You couldn't find it by searching.

Only a beating would force it out.

Wu had no backing.

Beating him was safe.

I barely listened.

**On the street,
trolleybuses passed one after another.**

**And in each one,
I imagined I saw Sima Li.**

**Feng Ming lived in a small courtyard
with three rooms.**

Yongzhen was hanging laundry in the yard.

**She was slightly plump
and had a gentle manner—
like a pediatrician
even when not wearing a white coat.**

She led us inside.

**The largest room
had been turned into a painting studio.**

Brushes lay scattered across palettes.

**Models,
plaster casts,
and even a human skull
were arranged for sketching.**

**On the wall
hung reproductions of famous paintings:**

***The Last Supper*,
Eve and the Serpent,
The Anatomy Lesson,
and Xu Beihong's
Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers.**

The room smelled strongly of oil paint.

I sneezed several times.

Feng Ming came out,
smiling.

“I just got back
and already have to teach a student.

Can’t refuse—
we’re family friends.”

He was from Zhejiang,
with refined features
and a well-proportioned figure
shaped by years of gymnastics.

He wore thin glasses
and had a deep,
thoughtful gaze.

Even after one meeting,
he left a strong impression.

Spend more time with him,
and you would realize
how sharp and capable he was—

the kind of person
who influences others without trying.

We chatted for a while.

Yongzhen brought out a thick stack of drawings—
Feng Ming's student's work.

I flipped through them.

Most were pencil sketches:
vegetables,
food,
parked vehicles,
boats,
and various male figures—

from Apollo
to a Soviet naval officer.

The technique was solid.

Clearly,
the artist had practiced extensively.

But something was missing.

They lacked spirit.

That was the fatal flaw.

“She works harder than you,” Yongzhen said to her brother.

“Sima Li has congenital heart disease...”

“What?” I was stunned.

**She pointed to the small signature
at the bottom of the drawings.**

We hadn’t noticed it before.

Yongren and I exchanged glances.

**I picked up a book,
pretending to read,
but understood nothing.**

**Yongzhen continued talking about a case at the hospital,
but we barely listened.**

Only Feng Ming kept asking questions.

As evening fell,

Yongzhen went outside to collect the laundry.

Soon,

voices drifted in:

“...After I got off at Beijing Station,

I couldn’t find my wallet.”

A soft voice.

“Oh no!

Was there anything important in it?” Yongzhen asked anxiously.

“My train fare...

my medical papers...

some small things...”

I looked outside.

It was her.

Sima Li.

**She was tall,
with neatly combed black hair.**

**Her face was pale,
almost sickly.**

**Her eyes carried
a faint,
lingering sadness.**

She was beautiful—

**in a quiet,
melancholic way.**

I glanced at Yongren.

His face was full of anger.

**That night,
Wu Xinghao would be beaten like a drum.**

The room grew dim

with the summer evening.

Sima Li stepped inside,
nodded to Feng Ming,
and reached for the light switch.

The light had not yet been turned on—

yet somehow,
the room already felt brighter.

Chapter 3

After dinner,

Yongzhen accompanied Sima Li to see a doctor.

Yongren left in a hurry as well—

Wu Xinghao was waiting for him.

That left only Feng Ming and me to clear the table.

During dinner,

Feng Ming had drunk quite a bit—

wine and beer mixed together.

Now he seemed slightly intoxicated.

As we worked,

he spoke casually,

almost as if to himself:

“You’ve been a little unusual today.”

My heart skipped.

I tried to cover it.

“Nothing.”

He looked at me sharply.

“Don’t hide it from me, Lu Zi.

Your eyes are brighter than usual.”

He placed the washed dishes into the cupboard.

“You’re excited.

You don’t have to pretend.”

After a brief silence,

he spoke again,

this time with the tone of someone recalling the past:

“I was like that once.

Come with me.”

I followed him into the inner room.

It was arranged with quiet taste—

the home of young intellectuals.

There was a double bed,
a writing desk,
two chairs.

Beside them stood a small crib.

Their infant son,
barely ten months old,
lay asleep with his finger in his mouth.

A dark birthmark showed on his arm.

“He sleeps so peacefully,” Feng Ming said softly.
“Without a care in the world.”

He gently covered the child with a thin blanket,
then stood looking at the wedding photo on the wall.

In the photograph,
Feng Ming looked energetic,
without glasses.

Yongzhen, by comparison,
seemed a little plain.

He stared at it for a while,
lost in thought.

Then,
suddenly,
he began to sing.

“There’s a song like this...” he said.

And in a full,
resonant voice—
careless of waking the child—
he sang:

“On a spring morning,
just as dawn breaks,
a young police lieutenant patrols the street...”

His voice,
dulled slightly by alcohol,
was still clear in pronunciation.

The story of the song was simple.

The young officer meets a girl

who breaks traffic rules.

From then on,
he returns again and again
to the place where they met.

But as time passes,
he never sees her again.

When the song ended,
Feng Ming let out a deep breath.

“There are many things you don’t understand yet,” he said.

“You’re still young.
You might laugh at that officer,
think him foolishly sentimental.

But that’s not true.

Even the most fleeting beauty
has value.”

He paused.

“Think of the protagonist in *White Nights* by Dostoevsky.

**The meaning of his whole life
lies in those few nights.”**

**I was surprised he would mention
such a dreamy,
impractical character.**

“You wouldn’t understand,” he said quietly.

**“Let me tell you the story
between me and Yongren’s sister.”**

He lowered his voice.

**“People who know us
all feel the same way.**

**Lu Zi—
you’re perceptive enough to see it.”**

“Not well matched,” I said honestly.

Feng Ming closed his eyes briefly.

“Yongzhen is a good person.

But there’s a real gap between us.

That’s the truth.”

**“Our relationship in university—
it was almost like something out of a novel.”**

“I grew up studying in Hangzhou.

My father was involved in the arts.

**When he was young,
he studied in Paris
together with Sima Li’s father.”**

**“He didn’t achieve anything remarkable,
but he was strict with me.”**

**“When I first entered university,
I believed life would be as straight
as the causeways of West Lake.”**

**“I put the creative passion I had for art
into studying medicine.**

That’s why I did better than most students.”

He gave a faint smile.

“I always had a strange thought—

**if someone like Grandet,
with his obsession for money,
could apply that same intensity
to something else—**

**how many miracles
might come from it?”**

**Then he waved it away,
returning to the point.**

“There were many excellent girls in my class.

I was free in that regard.

Everything was going smoothly—

until I created a problem myself.”

**“One year,
on International Women’s Day,
I wrote Yongzhen a short greeting letter.”**

“My intention was simple.

**She was the only child
of a revolutionary martyr in our class.**

**I wanted her to feel warmth
from the collective.**

**It was almost childish,
like something from a Young Pioneer.”**

He sighed.

**“Who would have thought
it would cause such trouble?”**

**“Her mother came to the school
and complained about me.**

**She said her only daughter
must become a specialist
and should not be distracted.”**

“I was criticized in class.

**Several respected classmates warned me
to be more careful.”**

**“When I left the office,
I found Yongzhen waiting outside.”**

**“‘Don’t be angry,’ she said apologetically.
‘My mother was out of line...
but she’s ill.’”**

He nodded slowly.

“Yes.

Her health was very poor.

She also suffered from schizophrenia.”

**“She often believed
people were trying to harm her.**

Sometimes she acted in ways
that made no sense at all.”

I urged him to continue.

“I suppressed my anger
and said,
‘I’m not angry.’”

“Then I started talking about a recent test.”

“Yongzhen worked very hard,
but her understanding was limited.

Her grades were good,
but her ability to work independently was weak.

For a doctor,
reading isn’t everything—
saving lives is.”

“I admired her persistence.

She could stay up all night studying.”

**“After that,
we began studying together regularly.**

**Over time...
feelings grew.”**

**“When I realized it,
I was just like you today—
shy,
excited...”**

He looked at me.

“Exactly like you.”

I avoided his gaze.

He smiled gently.

**“Of course,
her mother was furious.”**

**“One day,
I walked Yongzhen home.**

She insisted I come upstairs.

I reluctantly agreed.”

**“When her mother saw me,
she froze for a moment,
then ordered all the lights in the house turned on—
as if afraid I might steal something.”**

**“‘I knew it,’ she said.
‘You would not leave us alone.’”**

“Yongzhen tried to calm her.

**I stood there,
rubbing my hands,
not knowing what to do.”**

**“She questioned me—
my age,
my family,
my political background.”**

“Finally,

she said proudly:

‘Student Feng!

You are not allowed to come here again.

If you do,

I will report you.’”

“I couldn’t tolerate that.

My temper flared.

I said,

‘I never intended to come here.

I was only seeing a classmate home—

and she can leave with me.’”

“I turned to Yongzhen.

‘Let’s go.’”

“She followed me,

tears streaming down her face.”

**“Her mother collapsed to her knees,
moving forward on them,
crying:**

**‘Don’t go!
You’ll be deceived!’”**

“Yongren began to cry as well.”

**“We walked far away,
but we could still hear them.”**

“It was a tragedy.

The tragedy of illness.”

“The matter escalated.

**Her mother went to the university authorities,
sought help from old comrades.”**

“I couldn’t concentrate on my studies.

I was called in repeatedly for questioning.”

“But Yongzhen was determined.”

**“We built our love
in the midst of that storm.”**

“We read Lu Xun together.

We remembered his words:

**‘One must live—
only then can love have meaning.’”**

“She even considered changing her major.”

**“Looking back,
we should have realized
we weren’t suited for each other.”**

**“If we had remained ordinary friends,
it would have been better.”**

“But we were lost in passion.”

“It went on for years.”

**“Before graduation,
her mother made a final move—**

**she wrote to warn us to separate,
or our job assignments would be affected.”**

“The letter came from a hospital ward.

She was dying.”

**“When we were writing our theses,
she passed away.”**

**Feng Ming stood up,
poured himself another drink,
and finished it.**

“I paid for it soon after.”

**“Although I married Yongzhen,
I was assigned to Harbin.”**

“It wasn’t fair.”

“And worse—

after her mother died,
our relationship began to fall apart.”

“It had been built
in opposition to her.”

“We only see each other twenty days a year.

And even then,
we argue.”

“In my personal life...”

He paused.

“I’m not happy.”

He walked over to the crib
and looked at his son.

“I’m his father,” he said softly.

“But I rarely see him.”

“He’s smiling.

He's only ten months old.

He stands at the beginning of life.

He should smile."

There was a deep sadness in his voice.

I said quietly,

"I never realized you were suffering like this."

"That's because you're seventeen," he replied.

"You don't understand yet."

"At twenty,

you'll be different.

And years later,

you'll be experienced."

"But youth..."

He lowered his voice.

“Will be gone.”

He suddenly said:

“Come.

Let me show you a painting—

Nine-Level Waves.”

He lifted a piece of shining cloth.

Beneath it

was an oil painting.

The sea raged.

Wave after wave rose violently,

devouring everything in their path.

The broken foam shimmered

with strange colors

in the fading light.

At the center,

several drowning figures clung desperately
to a broken mast.

A rope ladder floated nearby,
its lower end already swallowed
by the dark depths.

One man raised a small flag—
a final plea for life.

I thought of all the unfortunate people
in the world.

“Why does Sima Li have congenital heart disease?” I asked.

“Her parents were too old,” Feng Ming replied.

“From a medical perspective,
such a large age gap is risky.”

Then he waved it off.

“Go sleep in the outer room.”

He finished the remaining alcohol.

He was drunk.

Perhaps I was too.

The impressions of the day overwhelmed me.

There was a box of matches on the table.

I took it.

I turned off the light.

In the darkness,

I struck a match.

For a moment—

I thought I saw Sima Li again.

Sitting at the table.

Sitting on the bus.

Hans Christian Andersen once wrote

The Little Match Girl.

Each flame revealed a vision—

a warm stove,

a feast,

a beloved grandmother.

For those who live in imagination—

a single spark

can open an entire world.

I struck match after match.

“Do you smoke?” Feng Ming muttered drunkenly.

“I have a lighter...”

I didn’t answer.

I walked outside.

The life I had kept within books—

was breaking open.

I felt that I had stepped

into an entirely new world.

Chapter 4

Gradually,

I grew close to Sima Li.

She was not an easy person to approach.

**At school, she had always kept to herself—
never raising her hand in class,
rarely speaking to anyone,
except for one or two distant acquaintances.**

**To her classmates,
she remained almost a stranger.**

**During end-of-term evaluations,
no one could name either her strengths or her faults.**

**She was simply...
absent from their judgment.**

She lived alone in every sense.

**Reading,
painting,**

and medical treatment filled her days.

She practiced sketching relentlessly.

**If she didn't soak her wrists in hot water at night,
the pain would keep her awake.**

Reading.

Treatment.

Drawing.

Again and again.

I once asked her which painter she admired most.

"Rembrandt," she answered simply.

What she admired was his relentless devotion to art.

Trying to meet her on equal ground,

I praised Rembrandt as a great master,

spoke about the Dutch Republic,

about progressive tendencies in art...

I said quite a lot.

Something shifted.

She looked at me with mild surprise—

as if to say:

You've read more than I expected.

Then she began telling me about Rembrandt's life—

how he lived in poor districts,

how after his wife died,

his maid took care of everything

so he could devote himself entirely to creation.

If I had been more perceptive,

I might have sensed that she was,

in some way,

justifying herself.

But I was young

and slow to understand.

I only realized that art

was the key to her inner world.

After that,

we spent more and more time together.

We compared what we had read.

We speculated about the future—

what the world might become by the year 2001,

how literature and art might change under the pressure of history.

We argued endlessly

about life and death.

She said Beethoven,

though dead,

still lived—

his nine symphonies

were nine radiant worlds,

destined to endure forever.

At other times,

we debated whether the law of the “negation of negation” was valid—

whether certain patterns in history would repeat themselves.

We argued fiercely.

I felt she had a certain academic rigidity.

**There were differences between us
that I could not fully explain.**

**And she knew very little about current affairs—
or even about China itself.**

“I don’t want to know,” she said frankly.

**“When I go to the cinema,
I buy three tickets.
I don’t want anyone sitting next to me.”**

I found that strange.

**Every day,
she continued her still-life sketches
and copied the works of masters.**

But her technique never seemed to advance beyond a certain level.

This troubled her deeply.

For a few days,

she stopped painting.

During that time,
we were together almost constantly.

My small dormitory
had its first real visitor.

She stood by the window for a while
and said:

“I often pass by here when I go for treatment.”

She didn’t know that,
above that very path,
there had always been someone watching her—
thinking of her.

She read my short stories.

My manuscripts were messy,
careless—
nothing like her meticulous drawings.

After reading them,

she remained silent for a long time.

Finally, she said:

“Does this count as art?”

She thought for a moment.

“Your writing isn’t entirely clumsy.

Some small passages are vivid—

the one where the bicycle hits the basketball stand, for example.

But this isn’t art.”

She paused again.

“I like writing that is full of talent.

What you’ve written...

the level isn’t very high.”

Then she asked:

“Why don’t you write poetry?”

Can't handle rhyme?"

I felt slightly irritated.

"No.

Rhyme isn't the problem.

I could manage that.

**I just don't have the passion—
the kind of intense emotion needed for poetry."**

She nodded.

"Then it's a lack of inspiration."

She went on:

**"Inspiration should be like a shooting star—
brief,
brilliant.**

**Not like an ordinary star,
blinking faintly all the time."**

**She was telling me,
in her own way,
that art could not be achieved overnight.**

“Balzac wrote thousands of pages before he became famous,” she continued.

“Publishers rejected him.

Even his family criticized him.

But he kept going.”

She added quietly:

“Inspiration does not visit the lazy.”

I responded:

“One must seize time.

**Those who abandon time
are abandoned by time.”**

We both knew

where each quotation came from.

We smiled at each other.

“And you?” I asked.

“I can’t paint well,” she said,
somewhat discouraged.

“I like Repin.

I like Levitan even more—
the vast, open landscapes.

The world feels endless there.”

She paused.

“But I don’t like Surikov.

In his paintings,
the eyes are exaggerated—
too large.

It may create atmosphere,

but it isn't truly beautiful."

I, on the other hand,
preferred Surikov's broad,
historical scenes.

Levitan's subtle,
almost intangible mood
left me cold.

Perhaps this
was where our difference lay.

One day,
we left my small room
and walked out of the school.

We both liked a narrow park
near the Youth League headquarters.

At the northern end
stood a freshly painted traffic booth,
flanked by sparse rows of low pine trees.

It felt cut off from the world.

The weather had turned cooler.

**During the day,
we read and painted separately.**

**In the evenings,
we met there—
without fail.**

It became part of our lives.

**Our conversations
grew more abstract.**

We rarely spoke of anything practical—

**as if we were beings
sustained only by thought.**

**“Do you know *The Ninth Wave*?” she asked one evening,
looking up at the clear night sky.**

“I saw it at Feng Ming’s place.”

“I love that painting,” she said softly.

“Every time I see it,

I think of the phrase:

**‘The sea of knowledge has no shore—
only hardship is the boat.’”**

She lowered her voice.

“I’m still not working hard enough.”

I said,

“I like it too.

There’s a British film—

***A Night to Remember*...”**

I told her the story briefly.

“In the end,

the ship sinks.

The men die.

Only women and the weak escape

in a small lifeboat.”

“What happens after that?” she asked.

“The final scene—
church bells tolling.

People dressed in black,
mourning the dead.”

The autumn night
made the story feel colder.

“Sea...” she murmured.

To me,
the sea was something powerful—
sublime,
beautiful.

But she preferred it at low tide—
calm,
quiet.

“To me,

the sea means peace,” she said.

I thought:

If we stood together before the sea,
how magnificent it would be.

Movement and stillness—
each reflecting the other.

Like the sea.

Like us.

Something inside me—
once empty—
was now filled.

Like an unseen ocean.

She suffered from intermittent heart attacks.

At times,
her heart would suddenly race,
and she would struggle to breathe.

When that happened,
she had to stop whatever she was doing—

one hand on her forehead,
the other on her chest,
eyes closed.

Whenever she was tired,
she looked the same.

I felt a deep sympathy for her.

I tried to avoid arguing too intensely.

But once,
at Feng Ming's house,
we argued fiercely.

“Art should awaken a sense of beauty,” I said.

“If no one can understand it,
calling it art is idealism.”

“Art is art,” she replied.

“It exists independently of us.

**To deny it because people don’t understand it—
that is also idealism.”**

**Feng Ming sat quietly between us,
trying to mediate,
saying something vague and ineffective.**

Neither of us was satisfied.

**Later,
we went to the park again.**

She asked:

“Do you know existentialism?”

I didn’t.

She smiled faintly.

“No wonder.

You read too much classical literature.”

**“For thousands of years,
techniques have hardly changed.**

**But in recent decades,
art has undergone major transformation.**

Young people are leading this change.”

She paused.

“Existentialism affirms it.”

Then, more quietly:

“I’m confused.

**If I keep practicing technique like this...
will I ever achieve anything?”**

“You’re not practical enough,” I said.

She lowered her voice.

“I know.

I live in an ivory tower.

I don’t want to destroy my ideals too early.”

“My home...

is full of conflict,

like the one in Ba Jin’s novels.”

“Life is short.

And mine will be even shorter.

A congenital tragedy.”

She continued:

“Human beings come into this world alone—

and leave it alone.”

“Life is like morning dew...

like a shooting star.”

“Flattery doesn’t make me laugh.

Rumors don't make me cry."

"It's as if

**I was born without the ability
to feel either."**

Then her eyes lit up slightly.

"Beethoven's Fifth Symphony...

**every note carries one message—
hope."**

"The only person who truly understood Beethoven..."

I finished her sentence:

"Romain Rolland."

She smiled brightly.

"You're right."

Then she plucked a blade of grass.

“Grass grows and dies.

Flowers wither before they bloom.

**But if they are written into stories,
painted into art—
they become eternal.”**

“Art is eternal.”

**She pressed her hand to her chest again
and closed her eyes.**

**To her,
this was a philosophy of art.**

**To me,
it was a philosophy of life.**

But I didn’t agree.

**Life, I thought,
could be beautiful.**

We were only seventeen.

There was still a long road ahead.

Night fell.

The police changed shifts.

The moon rose—

full and bright.

Was it Mid-Autumn Festival?

“The story you told—

the sinking ship,” she said softly.

“The sorrow of death

makes life seem empty.”

Moonlight fell on her pale face.

Each day,

she struggled with her failing heart—

yet continued to draw,

pouring her youth into art.

A deep,
tender sorrow
rose within me.

That night,
I returned late.

Yongren was practicing boxing in the room.

Only then did I realize—
I had almost forgotten him.

I lay on my bed,
staring at the ceiling.

He stopped and asked sharply:

“Where have you been?”

I answered vaguely.

“How long were you with her?”

He didn’t look at me.

“Several hours.”

He struck the lamp accidentally.

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I’m being proper,” I said calmly.

**“Platonic...
purely spiritual.”**

He glanced at me darkly.

“We both met her together.

We should both treat her well.”

Something was changing.

**Inside me,
something stronger than friendship
had taken hold.**

For the first time,

I began to watch him with suspicion.

That night,

I dreamed.

In different dreams—

she and Yongren

took turns as the center.

A few days later,

she came to the dorm,

excited.

She had seen a shooting star.

She spoke rapidly—

about art,

about change,

about abandoning rigid technique

and expressing the self.

“This will be a turning point,” she said.

She took out paper and pencil.

“Sit there,” she told me.

I couldn’t fully understand her.

But I sat still.

**She studied me carefully,
like a painter,
then began sketching.**

I looked at her.

**I was also drawing—
but in my heart.**

“Your face is good,” she said while drawing.

“You give the impression of kindness.

People trust kind men.

That’s good for a novelist.”

Then she added:

“The best judges of male beauty are painters.

Then... certain abnormal men.”

She stopped herself.

“Then women.”

“I wish I could draw you every day,” she said.

“For decades.”

I stood up suddenly.

She looked at me—

no longer vague,

but alert.

Then she raised her hand slightly,

warning me in an indirect way:

“In Raphael’s painting,

Plato and Aristotle debate at the Academy.”

“If I had been there—

I would have supported Plato.”

I sat back down.

“So would I.”

She looked at me—

with warmth,

with intensity.

We were both happy.

That night,

I couldn’t sleep.

Love should be pure.

I hesitated—

Should I tell her about Wu Xinghao?

Finally,

one night under the autumn moon—

the night our friendship ended—

I told her the truth.

“That day...

when you lost your wallet...

I was on the same bus.”

“Really?” she laughed lightly.

“I always thought so.”

Her laughter frightened me.

“I always believed—

when I needed help,

you would be there.”

“No...

it wasn’t like that.”

I told her everything.

Except one thing.

I did not mention Yongren.

She leaned back.

Her smile didn't disappear immediately.

She closed her eyes.

“So... this is who you are.”

Her voice was barely audible.

Two tears slipped down her face.

Then she added one word.

“So...

you are this kind of bad person.”

Her voice changed—

rough,

almost like a man's.

In the moonlight,

her tears stopped
at the corner of her lips—

and did not fall.

Chapter 5

Like a bud that withers before it can bloom,
our relationship ended suddenly—
long before it could reach the height I had imagined.

I learned something then:

Some truths should remain buried forever.
They must never be spoken.

But I learned it too late.

For more than ten nights,
Sima Li and I did not see each other.

After much hesitation,
on a gloomy afternoon in early winter,
I went to the children's hospital to find Yongzhen.

I hoped she could help us reconcile.

Perhaps—
like grass,
our friendship might grow again.

Yongzhen was in the duty room,
flipping through patient files,
a thick red-and-blue pencil in hand.

“Sister Yong,” I said,
using the childhood form of address.

She smiled warmly.

“You’ve grown taller since the last time I saw you.”

She asked me to sit,
while she remained standing.

I struggled to find a way to explain everything.

The hardest part was Wu Xinghao.
I simply couldn’t bring myself to speak of such ugliness.

“My brother told me you’ve been writing novels,” she said.

“I was actually quite moved.
At your age,
you still have imagination and curiosity.

I envy that.”

**She turned the pages casually,
scanning for new notes.**

**“I’d really like to know—
how do you write?”**

I hadn’t written for quite some time.

Not since Sima Li told me it wasn’t art.

**I had decided to stop
and study more before writing again.**

I thought for a moment.

“Writing feels like a kind of subconscious labor,” I said slowly.

**“When I pick up the pen,
it’s like playing with words.
Filling blank spaces,
making up lines...”**

I don’t really understand

why I write one way instead of another.”

Yongzhen nodded,
though not entirely convinced.

“Good modern Chinese novels are rare,” she said.

“You know Gorky’s famous line—
‘Literature is about people.’”

“Character is the most important thing.”

She continued:

“Some works aren’t very refined,
but they create powerful characters.

Others are beautifully written,
but empty.

Without people,
without meaning—
they’re not truly good.”

“I won’t have the chance to receive higher education,” I said with regret.

She laughed lightly.

“That’s foolish.

Most novelists never studied literature formally.

**In fact,
too much schooling can make writing worse.”**

**“A writer needs life experience—
and the ability to think in images.**

You won’t learn that in a classroom.”

**“Gorky only had a few years of education.
Society was his university.”**

She looked at me seriously.

**“You’re young.
Don’t rush to become famous.
That’s vanity.”**

“If your wings aren’t strong yet—

you shouldn't fly."

**"Many writers endure years of hardship
before achieving anything."**

Yes.

I thought—

I still had time.

**Twenty years of effort...
that would not be too late.**

She smiled faintly.

"Don't be too confident.

**Many artists struggle their entire lives
without success."**

She mentioned Feng Ming's father.

**"A professor,
trained in Paris.**

But his work...

nothing remarkable.

He calls it ‘expressionism.’

To me,

it just feels immature.”

Then she added lightly:

“I’m speaking as an outsider.

Still,

you do work hard.”

“I appreciate your advice,” I said sincerely.

She began talking about herself.

“Writing requires passion.

I used to have that.”

“After graduating,

I interned in obstetrics.

I wasn’t afraid to challenge authority—

even senior doctors.”

She gave a small smile.

**“I once stopped a famous specialist during rounds
to criticize how patients were treated.”**

Her eyes grew distant.

**“That kind of passion...
it’s gone now.”**

She continued:

**“I used to read novels,
trying to bring imagination into medicine.”**

**“When children cried during injections,
I would tell them stories—
about magic needles
that bring health and happiness.”**

“I made up fairy tales on the spot.”

She paused.

“People change.”

**“Over time,
I became cold.”**

“Doctors see death too often.”

**“What once seemed tragic
becomes...
routine.”**

She lifted a file.

**“This patient—
she won’t survive.”**

“She’s just a child.”

**She walked to the window,
looking out at the dull hospital buildings.**

**“My life now...
is mechanical.”**

“Home.

Ward.

Cafeteria.

Ward.

Home.”

“My passion—”

She paused.

“It’s gone.”

Then she turned suddenly.

“Today is not an ordinary day.”

I didn’t understand.

“It’s my mother’s birthday,” she said quietly.

I didn’t know what to say.

“In the past,

I couldn’t function on this day.

I would cry all night.”

She paused.

“My mother...”

Her voice trembled.

“She loved me deeply.”

She looked at me.

**“Maternal love
is the strongest emotion in the world.”**

Then, after a silence:

“She was also mentally ill.”

“People are complicated,” she said softly.

She closed the file.

“Come with me to the ward.”

In the dim corridor,

she hummed softly:

“Today is your birthday...
dear mother...”

Gradually,
the words faded.

Only one remained—

“Mother...”

Room 32 was small.

On the bed lay a young girl,
pale as paper.

Beside her sat a large,
rough-looking man.

I recognized him immediately.

He was known as “Old Beast.”

“Doctor... will I get better?” the girl asked weakly.

“Please...” the man begged.

“She’s my only sister.”

Yongzhen examined the girl carefully.

“Still stable,” she said calmly.

“Am I going to die?” the child asked.

Yongzhen touched her face.

“You’re still so young.

You’ll recover.”

But the girl didn’t believe her.

We left the room.

Outside,

Yongzhen said quietly:

“She won’t make it.”

“At most—

one more day.”

We returned to the duty room.

Then—

the door opened.

Sima Li stood there.

She saw me—

and immediately turned away.

I called her name.

Then hesitated—

but followed her out.

She walked quickly,

her gray scarf trailing behind her.

I followed her.

For the first time in my life—

I followed a woman.

People stared.

I didn't care.

We reached an empty ruin outside the city.

I called her name.

She turned—

but not to me.

Behind us—

a group of men approached.

Led by Old Beast.

Some carried knives.

For a moment—

it felt like the painting again—

The Ninth Wave.

There was no escape.

They surrounded us.

“Nice clothes,” one of them said.

“Take them.”

Their laughter was filthy.

Their words—

worse.

Sima Li trembled.

I tried to speak calmly.

“If you need money—

I can bring it tomorrow.”

It was useless.

Old Beast pulled me aside.

“Will my sister recover?” he asked suddenly.

“Yes,” I said.

“She will.”

He nodded slowly.

Then:

“You can go.”

“And her?”

“She stays.”

I refused.

He raised a blade.

In one swift motion—

a button from my coat fell to the ground.

“Go.”

I left.

I didn’t dare look back.

Then—

a scream.

I turned.

She was on the ground.

Her scarf around her neck—

like a rope.

Old Beast dragged her into the darkness.

Laughter echoed.

Sima Li—

was gone.

The cold wind rose.

And I fell

with it.

Chapter 6

A long time passed.

Darkness fell.

The figures in the distance had long disappeared.

I forced myself to stand.

I had lost nothing—

and yet,

it felt as if I had lost everything.

I did not dare to think further.

At a fork in the road,

my legs gave way.

Nearby, I saw a dense cluster of trees. I stumbled into the shadows and leaned against a trunk.

It was quiet there.

The wind could not reach inside.

I took off my hat and wiped the cold sweat from my face with my gloves.

**The blade in Old Beast's hand had exposed something in me—
weakness,
selfishness.**

“Hey, kid.”

**A voice came from behind me—
strangely warm.**

Someone else was in the shadows.

He called out again.

“Waiting for your girl?”

“Yes,” I said.

I had to lie.

“I'm waiting for someone too,” he said.

“My former lover.”

He moved slightly closer, though his face remained hidden.

Only his eyes—
restless,
shifting—
seemed alive in the darkness.

Perhaps because we shared the same purpose, he began speaking openly.

He told me he had once been famous at the aviation institute—a notorious womanizer.

In high school, he had nearly been expelled for misconduct. Later, in university, he continued the same way—
more successfully.

At first, he spoke cautiously, repeating the phrase:

“Romantic—but not vulgar.”

But soon,
he dropped the pretense.

I listened carefully.

Strangely,
I found myself sympathizing with him.

I even offered him my gloves.

He accepted them with satisfaction.

“It’s cold tonight,” he said.

**With the gloves on,
he became more animated.**

“There was a girl,” he continued.

“An overseas Chinese student. I thought she was wealthy.”

“I pursued her—purely for money.”

He laughed bitterly.

“I succeeded. In a month.”

“But she had no money.”

“I was the one who was fooled.”

He paused.

“I could have ended it cleanly.

But I rushed things.”

He did not explain further.

But the outcome, he said, was disastrous.

Then he told me something else.

**For years,
he had planned revenge.**

The girl was about to be married.

He had tracked her down.

**And tonight—
was the first night of his ambush.**

**The world suddenly seemed deeper—
more dangerous—
than I had ever imagined.**

“How much does a person spend in Beijing each month?” he asked suddenly.

I didn’t know.

My ignorance embarrassed me.

He broke a twig and began calculating in the dirt.

Adding.

Multiplying.

Planning.

When he finished, I asked,

“How did you learn all this?”

He explained.

He had studied men who succeeded with women.

Some had charm.

Others had money.

He had neither.

So he studied novels—

famous love stories—

and developed his own method.

In simple terms:

**Take what you can—
one by one.**

“Some girls are very pure,” I said.

“That’s useless,” he replied.

**“The purer they are,
the weaker they are.”**

I said nothing.

**His words—
strangely—
echoed something like logic.**

He began criticizing people my age.

“You’re naive,” he said.

“You think the street is a place for romance.”

**He described his cousin—
wandering the city,
chasing meaningless relationships.**

Then he laughed.

“In the old days, we spoke foreign languages when we courted.

You? You just wander.”

He went on,

increasingly bitter.

“Human progress should mean this:

better houses,

better food,

and complete satisfaction of desire.”

I couldn’t accept that.

I argued back.

He laughed.

“No need to argue.

You’re still young.

You’ll understand later.”

Then—

he suddenly stood up.

“They’re here.”

In the distance,
a couple approached.

He moved toward them quickly.

Before leaving,
he tapped my head lightly—
almost like a farewell.

Under the streetlight,
I saw his back.

Small.
Slightly hunched.
Dusty.

A small,
ugly man.

He showed them something—
papers.

Then—

without warning—

he struck the woman across the face.

She covered her face.

The man beside her trembled—

but did nothing.

They turned and walked away together.

The small man led.

The night grew colder.

I stood there,

shaken.

He had taken my gloves—

but left me with something else.

A glimpse—

of another kind of world.

Midnight.

I wandered alone through empty streets.

**In difficult times,
a person longs for a friend.**

Where was Yongren?

**In a narrow alley,
I saw a sign:**

Public Telephone.

I went in.

The room was clean.

A small stove burned in the center.

**On the table:
a telephone,
a price list,
some snacks,
and a glass of diluted liquor.**

An old man sat there,
drinking alone.

He told me to speak quietly—
his son was ill.

I glanced toward the bed—
and froze.

It was Wu Xinghao.

His head was wrapped in cloth.

His breathing was uneven.

Beside him lay several flattened coins.

I picked one up.

So it was true—
pickpockets used them as tools.

“What happened to him?” I asked.

“He was beaten,” the old man said.

“Badly.”

I called the hospital.

Yongzhen answered.

“I haven’t seen my brother,” she said.

“He comes and goes.”

Then:

“The girl... she won’t last long.”

I stood there,

holding the receiver.

Unable to move.

The old man began talking.

He had once studied in Paris.

He told me his life story—

of wasted youth,

of indulgence,
of regret.

He spoke of literature.
Of Rousseau.
Of failure.

He had known—
Sima Li's father.
Feng Ming's father.

I was stunned.

The world—
was suddenly connected.

When I left,
his words stayed with me:

“Life is long.
But if you choose the wrong path—
you will hit walls everywhere.”

I walked—
until I reached Feng Ming's house.

There was light inside.

**I stepped quietly into the yard—
and froze.**

**Inside—
were Feng Ming
and Sima Li.**

I hid beneath the window.

“...Lu Zi is a bad person,” she said.

She told him everything.

**But—
she was safe.**

Workers had rescued her.

Relief flooded through me.

Feng Ming laughed coldly.

“He’s useless.

A fool.”

The words struck me like a blow.

I lowered my head.

Time passed.

When I looked again—

Feng Ming was closer to her.

She stepped back—

until she hit the crib.

The baby cried.

He silenced it—

carelessly.

“I love you,” he said.

He spoke of passion.

Of artists.

Of freedom.

She leaned there—

weak,

silent,

thinking.

Darkness filled the room.

And outside—

darkness filled me.

A bright meteor crossed the sky.

For a moment—

it shone.

Then—

it would fall.

And become

something ordinary.

Chapter 7

That very night, something happened to Yongren.

He and his companions had been robbing pedestrians in the Haidian district. By bad luck, they ran into a patrol team from the Sports Institute. They were all arrested and taken there.

Yongren was locked alone in a storage room used for heavy training equipment.

In certain moments, extraordinary people can unleash extraordinary strength.

At midnight, Yongren smashed a hole in the wall with his bare hands, tore out bricks, stole a bicycle, and escaped back into the city.

Around nine in the morning,

he burst into our dormitory and shook me awake from a series of nightmares.

“Lu Zi! Something big happened...”

His voice was less sharp than usual.

He told me everything.

Then he hesitated.

Then he said,

“Not that. That’s nothing.”

He turned his back to me.

“Sima Li... she wants to be with me.”

I jumped up.

“That’s impossible.”

“It’s true.”

He told me what had happened.

He had gone to his sister’s house.

No one was there.

Only a note from Feng Ming—
he had suddenly returned to Harbin.

Then—

Sima Li arrived.

Disheveled.

Eyes swollen.

Changed.

Older.

She stood there for a long time.

Then—

she threw herself into Yongren's arms.

Yongren flushed.

“I didn't believe it either.”

He confessed something.

He had once envied me.

But—

he chose friendship.

“I didn't want to betray you.”

I looked at him.

Every word was real.

But then—

everything changed.

“She told me everything,” he said.

And then—

he looked at me.

“Why did you leave her there?”

I said nothing.

He made his decision.

“I’ll find him.”

Old Beast.

He took a kitchen knife,
wrapped it in newspaper,
and prepared himself.

Like a man walking toward death.

I followed him.

We rode together.

**At the hospital—
we saw the dead child.**

**Sima Li's scarf—
covered her face.**

**Old Beast stood there,
grieving,
broken.**

Yongren stepped forward.

“Return the scarf.”

The air froze.

**Then—
the attack began.**

Blood.

Violence.

Chaos.

When it ended—

**Old Beast lay on the ground,
covered in blood.**

**Yongren stood there—
shaking.**

“Take it,” he said.

I took the scarf.

And ran.

**Behind me—
shouting.**

Sirens.

Everything felt unreal.

**As if—
it had all been a dream.**

Chapter 8

Yongren was taken away.

Feng Ming disappeared.

Sima Li—

drifted somewhere in between.

I became empty.

Our dormitory felt too large.

Too quiet.

We were only seventeen.

One evening,

I ran into the gang again.

They chased me.

I escaped.

I hid—

in a government compound.

There, I met a girl—

Zhang San's cousin.

A law student.

She sheltered me.

Fed me.

Spoke to me.

She explained:

law,

society,

morality.

Then she told me—

about Zhang San.

He had gone mad.

Because of a girl.

A girl who played with him.

Used him.

Destroyed him.

Her name—

was Sima Li.

The floor seemed to shift beneath me.

That night—

I couldn't sleep.

A question formed in my mind:

If judged—

was I guilty?

No.

I was not.

And yet—

nothing felt clean anymore.

Chapter 9

**From that point on—
I changed completely.**

**I began to understand “the Glove.”
His words.
His logic.**

**Life—
was no longer simple.**

**I learned how to survive.
How to get money.
How to read people.**

**The world—
became my school.**

**I studied everything:
faces,
desire,
fear.**

And Sima Li—

still passed by my window.

Winter ended.

Spring came.

One morning—

she returned.

She had changed.

Her body.

Her expression.

Her presence.

She spoke:

about love,

about freedom,

about another man—

Feng Ming.

She described him—

as brilliant,

dangerous,

irresistible.

She told me everything.

About that night.

About crossing the line.

About illusion—

and disappointment.

She said,

“I love you.”

Then added,

“But I love my freedom more.”

We kissed.

It meant nothing.

Something inside me—

had already died.

I looked at her—

and felt nothing but distance.

Not love.

Not desire.

Only—

emptiness.

I realized:

What I held in my arms—

was no longer a living girl,

but something—

already fading.

That night—

I sent her drawings to Yongzhen.

And I heard:

Yongren would return tomorrow.

Chapter 10

The next afternoon, Yongzhen and I went to pick up Yongren.

At the police station, a young officer received us. He spoke with a northeastern accent and told us that Yongren had behaved well during his period of “study and confession.”

His problem, though serious, was not without hope.

“With the right understanding,” the officer said, “he can be treated leniently.”

Yongren came out carrying his things.

His face looked cleaner than before.

But he moved more slowly.

We walked back in silence, taking turns carrying his belongings.

From the loudspeakers came the sound of a revolutionary opera—*The Red Lantern*.

A girl’s voice, young and resolute, rang out:

“My father stands like pine and cypress,
strong and unyielding—

a true Communist!

I follow him forward without hesitation...”

We glanced at one another.

Yongren flushed.

Yongzhen lowered her head.

I felt ashamed.

The Party—

to us—

was something intimate.

We had grown up under its protection.

We loved it like family.

And yet—

we had strayed.

On the way back, Yongren asked quietly:

“Where is Sima Li now?”

He had been thinking of her all along.

I avoided the question.

Instead, I said,

“Let’s celebrate tonight at the Xinqiao Hotel. Invite her too.”

I called her.

Yongren waited outside.

She refused.

“I can’t come,” she said weakly.

“I have a fever... the doctor told me to rest for a week.”

Then, strangely, she added:

“Take care of yourself. Eat properly. Don’t harm your body.”

I hung up.

Then I lied.

“She’ll come,” I told Yongren.

That night, we went to the Xinqiao Hotel.

The Western restaurant was crowded.

People of all kinds sat together—
some with inner worlds,
some without.

To our surprise,
Wu Xinghao was there.

He sat alone, drinking.
Well dressed.
Eating well.

Still stealing, no doubt.

He greeted us politely.

We ignored him.

I, however, stayed behind to talk.

He spoke bitterly about his father—

a failed man,
a corrupt man,
a pathetic man.

Then, suddenly, he asked:

“Have you heard of *The Ninth Wave*?”

“Yes,” I said.

“A famous painting.”

He laughed.

“No.

It’s a person.”

“Sima Li.”

My heart trembled.

“She’s been passed around,” he said casually.

“Doesn’t even take money. Sometimes she gives things away.”

I said nothing.

At the table, Yongren waited.

Three plates.

One empty seat.

Time passed.

She never came.

Yongren spoke—

about reform,

about guilt,

about returning to the right path.

“We must change,” he said.

I agreed.

But inside—

I was drifting.

He spoke of going to the countryside,

of transformation,

of becoming worthy.

I looked at him.

Even in his black hair,

there were strands of white.

“So do you,” I said.

We had aged too early.

I felt exhausted.

What was life?

If it was nothing but repetition—

desire—

and emptiness—

what meaning did it have?

I could endure public criticism.

But not—

my own conscience.

It haunted me.

We talked about the future—

about youth,

about class,
about destiny.

“I must become a true successor,” I said.

But even as I said it—
I was unsure.

Was our worldview already formed?
Or still changing?

If we had already chosen wrongly—

then everything—
would be tragedy.

We fell silent.

Then,
I mentioned Sima Li again.

Yongren said calmly,
“There was never a foundation between us.”

I felt afraid.

He looked at me.

“You were the first,” he said.

“I was the second.”

I said nothing.

Feng Ming—

was the first.

But I did not dare to say it.

“Are you still writing?” Yongren asked.

“Yes.

Novels.

Notes.

Letters.

Confessions.”

He laughed.

Nearby, people debated trivial things—

how to eat properly,

how to live properly.

And yet—

the world outside—

was collapsing.

“Nine-Level Waves,” I murmured.

Yongren nodded.

“That’s us.”

Then he said quietly,

“Change yourself.”

I didn’t answer.

Instead,

I walked out.

I saw Wu Xinghao again.

And suddenly—

I had an idea.

I put my arm around him.

Smiled.

Spoke kindly.

Then—

I sent him ahead.

Into the dark.

I picked up a brick.

I was going to strike him.

To hurt him.

To destroy something.

Perhaps—

to destroy myself.

I walked forward—

brick in hand.

Inside me—

a wave rose.

A great wave.

The Ninth Wave.

At the crossroads—

I stopped.

I did not know—

which path—

was mine.