

心兒它在飛飛 — 女工的心聲

**My Heart Soars:
A Factory Girl's Story**

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Chun-hsia has left us, and I'd like to go too. My sister and I have had it out with each other.

“If that's all you care about your sister, I'm not going to kneel down and beg you,” my sister cried out at me, in anger and tears. “Go ahead and quit, if that's what you want. And you don't need to invite me to your wedding – I won't go and won't send you a gift, you can be sure about that. If I'd known you were the kind of person who couldn't care less about family or promises, I'd never have bothered teaching you so much in the first place!”

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The sun has not yet climbed above the bamboo, and the grass by the river is still damp with beads of dew – just like my eyelashes now. In the distance, the cars on the freeway rush by, one after the other, as though fleeing for dear life. They fall short of crashing into each other by such a little bit. But I hear nothing, and wouldn't hear anything even if they did crash, unless I could grow wings and fly over to them. What good are the two legs I was born with? They hardly ever leave the sewing machine pedal. They fall asleep after I've been sitting there working a long time, and I feel like my body has been separated into two parts.

I'm heartbroken. “The kind of person who couldn't care less about family or promises?” If I were the kind of person who didn't care about family or promises I wouldn't have worked here from age thirteen to eighteen. I trained in all of the new workers here at my brother-in-law's cap factory. But I'm still only paid by the piece, NT\$2.50 per cap, and never have I received a penny extra. Oh yes, they're 'nicer' to me – of the ten sewing machines, I get to use the newest and best one, the one that doesn't break down all the time. But every time my sister was away, or was away on maternity leave, I took care of all the cooking for everybody. I cared for their bawling kids. Even if I haven't made a huge contribution, I have certainly worked hard and done my part.

I don't know where Chun-hsia is now. I feel even more miserable when I think about Chun-hsia's leaving. She's the only soul on earth who understands me, who could console me. But complaining does no good. Maybe we were just not allotted a good fate, but I won't give up hope.

I got good grades in elementary school. The teacher said I was especially good at drawing and composition, and I won several awards. But...

“What good is it for a girl to study so much?” my father would say to my mother. “In the end she will always marry into another family, and will she support her

parents then? A-hsiung is going into the army, so it's bad enough with one less income in the family. Where is money for school going to come from when grain prices are so low? The more education they get, the more money that must be spent."

My mother is illiterate, and has only to tend the vegetable plots, feed the chickens and ducks, do the weeding, and dry the grain – so she also has no concept of what good an education could be for a girl. And what thirteen-year-old has the judgment to know who's right and who's wrong? What right does she have to make her own choices? I went to work at the small neighborhood cap factory, just like my sister; the one big difference was that the factory owner eventually became my brother-in-law.

That was the year of the oil crisis, and a huge cutback in foreign orders. Once a shipment was judged to be substandard and was sent back to us. My brother-in-law was thrown into such a panic when this happened that he hardly ate or slept, and his workers left, one after the other. Then he heard that the domestic market for caps wasn't bad, so he scraped together some capital through loans and revolving credit associations, bought cloth and lining, lined up middlemen, and prepared to shift from manufacturing for export to selling to the domestic market. He then reopened his factory. My brother said if we could produce a cap for NT\$18, including materials and labor, and he sold it to the middleman after adding an NT\$8 profit, the middleman could add on another NT\$8 for his profit when he sold it to the local distributor, then local distributor could take an NT\$8 profit when he sold it to the retailer, and the retailer could tack on another NT\$8 to the price for his own profit.

Because the wages he offered were so low, my brother-in-law had a hard time finding female workers locally, so he went down south to his hometown and brought back A-Tsai and the five others. All were three or four years younger than me except for A-Tsai, who was a bit older. They had just graduated from grade school, and knew nothing at all about anything, so I had to teach them from the very beginning.

At first they could produce at most seven hundred caps a month. From this, NT\$300 was taken out for meals, NT\$200 was set aside as spending money, and the little more than NT\$1,000 that was left was sent to their families by my brother-in-law. After they had worked for a year and were skilled in the production process they were promoted to 'master' workers; this made them confident and arrogant, picking at this and that, complaining about what was wrong, and reluctant to work overtime. Even though I was just as sick and tired of work as they were, I was seen as being on my sister and brother-in-law's 'side', so they kept up their guard with me, and often unloaded their dissatisfaction on me.

It was about nine months ago, I think, that my sister mentioned to me as we were eating:

"A granddaughter of one of our neighbors has moved here, and says she's looking for work. She used to work in Taipei, but her husband is serving in the army nearby, so she followed him here."

"Why don't you go ask her if she'd like to come here to work?" my

brother-in-law said to me.

“I hear she’s a high school graduate. I kind of doubt she’d be interested.”

“Bring her over so we can have a talk with her,” my brother-in-law urged.

The stereo in a corner of the room was playing my favorite song just as Chun-hsia followed my sister into our cramped, chaotic factory:

*The wind soars, the clouds soar, the birds soar,
And my heart, it soars too,
The wind and clouds fly, they fly, and fly,
I want to soar like a bird, I want my heart to soar...*

Maybe it was this cheery, buoyant song, or maybe it was Chun-hsia’s shoulder-length hair, her slightly knit brow, the pure, sincere look of the smile breaking on her face – in any case she reminded me a bit of soft-pop singer Feng Fei-fei. Just looking at her filled me with warmth.

My brother-in-law politely offered her a chair and poured her a cup of tea. My hands kept busy at the sewing machine, attaching one cap brim after another. But my concentration was focused on the conversation in progress.

“How long have you been here in central Taiwan?”

“Less than a week,” she answered in a soft voice.

“What kind of work experience do you have?”

“I worked for five years in an electronics factory after graduating from junior high school.”

“I hear you’re a high school graduate,” my brother-in-law pressed further with his questions.

“Yes, I attended evening classes.”

“Are you married?”

“Uh...yes.” Strange that she should be embarrassed about something like this. I saw her lower her head.

“Are you willing to make caps here?”

“I’ve never done it before. I don’t know if I could do it. But I’m willing to try.”

My brother-in-law was very happy when he saw that she was willing to work without first discussing terms, because they *really* needed workers. Concerned that she might regret her decision, he kept emphasizing how you could get the knack

quickly if you paid close attention when learning, that maybe at the beginning you wouldn't make too much money, but once you were good at it, you could easily make five or six thousand a month. He added that she could live and eat at the factory, and urged her to look after us 'younger sisters', to use her experience to help the management of the factory really get on track. My brother-in-law had a tongue that could pass off a corpse as a living soul. I was surprised to note that there was even a hint of sincerity in his tone of voice, probably because he was talking to a high school graduate from Taipei!

My sister once praised me for having a good head on my shoulders and nimble hands and feet; what others had to be shown five times before they got it, I picked up after she went over it just once. I saw that Chun-hsia was like this too. It was no trouble at all to teach her. In less than a month her speed was almost up to that of A-Tsai and the rest.

Eight or nine of us girls slept in a room about 180 feet square. Even though the only thing in the room was a metal bunk bed, the room looked very crowded. Everybody's things were scattered on the bed and floor, and arguments often erupted whenever somebody tried to find something, or tried to claim personal space. This had from very early on been unbearable for me.

Last year I told my sister that I didn't want to work overtime in the evening, that I wanted to get to bed earlier. My sister said to me unhappily that if we as family members didn't set a good example, the others would hardly be willing to follow. Then I suggested that I rent my own place nearby, and asked if my brother-in-law could subsidize half the rent. My brother-in-law agreed at first, but then said he couldn't set a precedent like this – if he did then all the other girls would ask for the same treatment.

Then one day Feng-e got into yet another a big argument with A-Tsai, this time over a song book, and both said they didn't want to stay here any longer, that they wanted to go back home to the south. My sister and brother-in-law couldn't get them to change their minds no matter what they said. Then Chun-hsia stepped in to mediate. Her words worked like magic; the argument stopped. Chun-hsia used the opportunity to suggest to my brother-in-law that he put up some shelves on the wall, buy some plastic clothes closets, and require that everybody keep all her things in one set place so they wouldn't be scattered all over the room and then cause an argument when they couldn't be found. My brother-in-law agreed to this.

Chun-hsia was the closest to me in age, so we found it very easy to communicate. I sometimes asked her over to my home, or to the riverside to pick fragrant white flowers. I told her that I hated working overtime, that my health was getting worse because of it, and that I didn't even get to keep the extra money I was earning – it all went to my father. My father was getting up in years, and had hired a number of people to help out in the fields. My mother said that the little money we took in selling grain went to pay the workers' wages. All they got out of farm work was rice to eat; they depended on what we kids earned away from the farm to cover most of their household expenses.

“If your family’s finances are tight, it’s only right that you help them out,” Chun-hsia said.

“Yes, it’s only right; but it seems to me as though my father never gives his daughters a second thought. He was willing to buy a motorcycle for my eldest brother, and to pay his tuition to go to night school. But when I was sick and asked for money to see a doctor, he had not a word of comfort for me, grumbled for a good long while, and looked really unhappy about having to help me out.” I was indignant.

“There’s nothing much you can do about the elder generation’s idea that boys are better than girls. Have you really not been able to set aside anything at all for yourself?”

“My sister sets aside NT\$500 every month to put into an insurance savings plan through the post office, without telling my father. My sister said she used to do this too; otherwise she would have had nothing at all to her name when she married, after all those years of work. I also get a couple hundred NT dollars in spending money each month.”

“You grew up in a much less complicated living environment than I did,” she said gloomily.

Chun-hsia told me that her father was a retired soldier, and was in his early fifties when he got married, while her mother was only in her twenties. She had come to Taipei from the country to work as a domestic, when she was introduced to her father. She remembers her home as a battlefield with very few days of peace and quiet. Her mother would pack up and leave after each argument or fight, and her father would stay home and drink himself into a stupor. After finishing a bottle of liquor he’d smash it to the floor.

“My father died when I was in ninth grade, and my mother remarried very soon after. My stepfather was a wholesaler. At the beginning he was nice to me, until one time when he took me to see a movie and in the dark I discovered a hand fondling my leg. I stood up indignantly and stormed out of the theater. After that I felt disgust – and fear – every time I saw him. Fortunately I soon finished junior high school and could go out and make my own living. I never again wanted to live in that home that didn’t belong to me.”

“So after you left home you went to work in the electronics factory?” I asked.

“No. I sold clothes in a boutique for half a year. I worked from nine in the morning till ten at night every day. I collapsed on my bed from exhaustion as soon as I returned to my dorm room. The work was boring and the pay was lousy. I felt envious every time I watched a student carrying a book bag go by, and I deeply desired to go back to school. Then I took the job at the electronics factory – I worked during the day and attended classes at night. After a few years I was promoted from an entry-level worker to a supervisor, and finished my high school education. Looking back on that time, I realize those were tough years, but I consoled myself with the thought that I was self-sufficient financially, and had also realized my dream

of going back to school.”

We got a day off only every other week. We’d all go and do our own thing. But we never did anything besides window shopping or watching a movie or TV.

On this hot and stifling August day everybody was so sick and tired of everything as they sat in front of their sewing machine, they didn’t even feel like talking.

“How about if we all go to the beach together next Sunday?” Chun-hsia’s fresh and unexpected suggestion perked everybody up.

The golden sunshine and clear blue sea painted reflected color on our pale skin. We rolled up our pantlegs and let the waves splash and play around our feet. Chun-hsia dragged A-Tsai along in a sprint, and her beautiful long hair flowed in the breeze. A big wave burst in front of them, and A-Tsai turned back and fled, screaming. After she discovered that her clothes were soaked, she laughed so hard she didn’t bother trying to hide her prominent front teeth.

Mom often says I’m moody and have a quick temper. But it’s strange – when I’m by the sea, my head is completely clear; all the mental clutter is gone.

Everybody at the picnic in the scruffy beach windbreak was like a zebra, with the trees casting shadows of leaves and branches on them. Chun-hsia and I led everybody in group games. Just then three guys came over toward us from out of the shadows not far away.

“Hey, Lee, you’re the good-looking one – you go and talk to them.” A be pimped young man gave the tall, thin guy standing next to him a shove.

“It was A-Yang’s idea – he should do it.” His face reddened as he tried to weasel out of the proposition.

“OK, if you want me to do the talking, I’ll do the talking – since it looks like you shrinking violets aren’t quite up to it!” The one who spoke was dark and hefty. They had diverted our attention to themselves, and it was pretty funny to watch them trying to pass the buck to get someone else to talk.

“Do you want something?” Chun-hsia asked them.

“We work at a machinery factory over in Taya, and would like to get to know you ladies better. Would you mind if we joined your games?”

The mood was certainly different once the guys joined us. I subconsciously started smoothing out my soaked and wrinkled clothes, and when I looked up I caught sight of A-Tsai trying to comb out her hair with her fingers, while letting just a bit of a smile spread over her face. Some felt embarrassed, huddled together and giggled furtively; others were like birds in spring, chattering and chirping away. Chun-hsia was the only one at her ease, and she continued to emcee the day’s program from the

center of the group.

I ended up in the same group as Lee, the tallest of the three, in a rotational singing game. I led in the singing of “The Comfort of Friendship,” “Running Toward the Rainbow,” “Princess Wang Chao-chun,” “A Little Poem,” “Asking the Wild Geese,” “Misty Moon, Misty Birds,” “Awaiting Chun Feng,” “Waiting However Long It Takes,” “Endless Love,” “Thinking of You by the Riverside,” and others. Lee knew some of them, but not all; in any case he kept gazing at me with full concentration the whole time. When I caught his eye my heart started pounding, and I almost missed my cue singing.

Everybody exchanged names and addresses before parting. Lee came up to me and told me his name was Lee Chun-lung. I didn’t want to give him my real name, so I changed the tone of my second character from the word ‘beautiful’, a third tone word, to ‘plum’, a second tone word with the same pronunciation.

Two weeks later, I received a letter addressed to *Miss Wang Mei* (‘plum’) *-fen*. Everybody laughed and made a big deal of it and wanted me to open it. They also got a kick out of my little name game. In his letter, Lee said his family had a fruit orchard, and he invited us all over to come fruit-picking. His last line read: “Your beautiful voice keeps echoing in my ear.”

Chun-hsia didn’t go with us to the orchard to pick guavas and bellfruit, because it was her husband’s day off and he was coming to see her. When we all came back full of excitement and laden with hand-picked fruit, I noticed Chun-hsia in a special plaid dress talking with her husband, who was in uniform. I was surprised to see what a baby face her husband had. Sitting next to Chun-hsia, his closely-cropped hair and clean-shaven face made him look like a little boy who had never ventured far from home. It posed a startling contrast to Chun-hsia’s polished maturity.

After a period of intense correspondence with Lee, I was frequently distracted, and let my thoughts run rampant. I often got myself all worked up over finishing my caps as quickly as possible, so much so that I was too tense to fall asleep at night. Disgusting-looking pimples starting popping out all over my face.

My mother was the only one in my family who really showed any concern for me and my problems. I’d often unload my troubles on her when I went home for a visit, and tell her that my energy level was way down, that I often felt dizzy and got headaches. One time my mother went to ask the gods about this. Their response was that my weak body and irregular periods were due to a fright my spirit suffered when playing too hard at the riverside that day. To cure it, I was to go to a neighborhood temple, burn sacrificial money to the gods, and call out, “Long life to the Crown Prince!” My mother made a second trip to see the blind man at the Matsu Temple to perform a rice grain divination and ask for guidance as to where we could find the right medicine for my malady. My mother then took me to the Chinese pharmacy just beyond the Southern Gate in the city, under a big banyan tree. She used money from her personal nest egg, earned from selling duck down and washing clothes for women during their first month after childbirth, to buy a few hundred NT’s worth of dried ginseng slices plus dried *longans* to be boiled into a broth for me to drink. Even

though I noticed no change in the state of my health after drinking it, I did feel deep gratitude toward my mother. But I was unable to talk to my mother about my love life. People of her generation relied on a matchmaker to bring a couple together, and had no concept of picking a partner based on love.

Chun-hsia could see what was going on with me, though, and asked me whether the agitation I was experiencing had anything to do with my going out with Lee.

“Yes. He seems to be pretty serious. I think he’s OK too, and we always have lots to talk about. But his family’s another story. He has a houseful of uncles and brothers; none of them has left the grandparents’ home to set up a household for themselves. More than twenty people eat together every day. If someday I were to marry him, the cooking duties alone would be enough to keep me in constant misery. I really envy civil servants and their little nuclear families with their light household duties and nobody around to mind their business for them – they can live free and easy, as they please...Chun-hsia, you still haven’t told me how you and your husband met, and when you got married.”

Her cheeks flushed suddenly, and she was silent for a moment before replying.

“It doesn’t matter if I tell *you*, but please don’t pass this information on to anybody else. Ya-ming and I haven’t officially registered our marriage yet. He’s an orphan who grew up in an institution for homeless children. He’s a year and a half younger than me, and won’t even be twenty for a few more months. We’ll go and register our marriage after he turns twenty.” I was startled by what she said, and continued listening.

“I guess everything is destiny. I used to know a guy, from a rich family. They had a car, a house – and he was pretty good-looking. He was crazy about me. He proposed to me after I finished high school, but I refused him without a second thought. He was furious, and married someone else within a month.”

“Oh...” I intoned regretfully.

“Ya-ming had only finished elementary school, and worked as a mechanic in a repair shop near the electronics factory. One rainy day as I was riding my bike to work, I fell into the mud after trying to dodge a taxi that suddenly burst out of an alley. Ya-ming just happened to be passing by, and helped me up. I had sprained an ankle, and he brought me home on the bike. That’s how everything started.”

“He was younger than me, and at the beginning I treated him as I would a younger brother. But maybe because neither of us had much family to speak of, we soon became intimate. Eventually I was unable to sort out what in my feelings toward him were like feelings toward a family member, what was friendship, and what was romance. He went along with almost anything I said, like when I asked him to give up smoking, he really did stop.”

“Are you sure you want to marry him?” I found it hard to believe that Chun-hsia would take a decision like this.

“All along I’ve felt terrible conflict and pessimism about the whole thing, that we had no future together. People without any higher education and a good family background have a tough time in the world. I don’t want to be stuck working in a factory the rest of my life, and I certainly don’t want to marry someone who will never be anything more than a shop hand, and live out my days in poverty. I often fantasize about passing the college admissions exam and walking proudly down the street with an armful of fat books, or sitting in a coffee shop or shave-ice store, holding a discussion with a quiet, gentle, bespectacled young man. But I know that with me working during the day and holding a high school diploma from only a second or third-rate night school, I would have a terrible time competing in the university admissions exam. Even if by some wild chance I passed, I would still have to keep on working like crazy to support myself and pay my tuition. It’s better just not to think about it. When I do, it really gets me down.”

Once you give in to love you fall into a pit that’s very hard to climb back out of. Before he went into the army I discovered I was pregnant. I was shocked and terrified, and went and got an abortion at a private clinic. Ya-ming bawled his eyes out after he found out, because he thought I was planning on leaving him. He said he didn’t want to live anymore.

“Mei-fen, you have no idea of how much misery I carry around with me. I really do like him. When he went into the army, I decided to quit my job in Taipei and take any old job I could find here and wait for him, so he would feel at ease about me. For a while my spirits really hit bottom, and I even thought of ending it all. By now I’ve decided not to take things so seriously. Maybe we’ve just been assigned bad fates – but I haven’t given up all hope yet. Mei-fen, you’re still young and you’ll have lots more chances. You don’t have to be in any hurry to commit yourself to Lee.”

I was really moved by what she said, but it also gave me a feeling of unbearable discomfort. I felt as though I’d suddenly grown up a great deal. What Chun-hsia told me didn’t succeed in chasing away my anxiety, but I felt as though I’d been given an eye wash, and things that were blurry before had now come into sharp focus.

After selling to the domestic market for some time, my brother-in-law decided to go back to producing for export. I heard that Saudi Arabia, the big oil producer, had placed a big bunch of orders, and they didn’t make high demands regarding quality. This would be easy money.

“You have to grab an opportunity and hang onto it tight when it comes by,” my brother-in-law said. “Who knows what the future will hold after this windfall? There might be another recession next year.”

Producing for export was different from producing for the domestic market. You didn’t have to come up with the capital yourself. The foreign buyer supplied you with the materials and designs, and all we had to do was supply the labor; we were in effect paid by the piece. My brother-in-law added two new machines, and kept us under constant pressure to work overtime and finish the orders quickly.

I worked from eight till noon in the morning, from one till five in the afternoon, then from six till nine at night. When the order was near completion we worked through the night without sleeping. We were driven almost to the breaking point, and it was no surprise that two new workers left after a month. A-Tsai and the rest complained and started talking about finding themselves a new work environment, maybe a big factory in the city.

“Chun-hsia, is it better in the big factories in the city?” Everybody gathered around Chun-hsia, their eyes sparkling with expectation.

“Where should I start?” Chun-hsia said, knitting her brow.

“In places like the electronics factory where I used to work, there were an early and a late shift. I worked only mornings, for eight hours, so I was able to study at night. Some people want to earn more money and do voluntary overtime at night. The pay is really low if you just work the early shift – the starting pay is only NT\$3,000 or NT\$4,000 a month. Even after all those years I put in there, my salary never got much higher than that. And prices are high in the city. After they deduct for room and board, you really don’t end up with very much.”

“Oh, so what!” A-Tsai exclaimed. “The work is easy, and if you make enough to live on, that’s good enough. At least life in the city isn’t as boring as it is here!”

“Working in a big factory is *not* easy. Here we can at least listen to music and talk with each other while we work. Every minute, every second in a big factory you’re tense from head to toe, the roaring of the machines really wears you down, and you end up pretty tired at the end of the day. And they have a whole set of stupid rules, like docking your pay for every minute you’re late, and not giving you the same bonus that other full-time workers are entitled to. And all kinds of characters work at places like that, so people don’t associate too much with each other, and don’t care too much about each other. It’s not like here, where we’re all very close on a day to day basis. I’m afraid you might have a hard time adjusting to working in a big factory.”

“Is it true that you get free medical care if you work for a big factory?” I’d heard this somewhere before.

“You do get better benefits at a big factory. All the workers have to enroll in a labor insurance plan, and you have to pay a premium of NT\$60 or NT\$70 every month, regardless of whether you get sick or not. A lot of people resent this extra cost, pick up a doctor’s visit slip or two each month, and go to certain hospitals to exchange them for a little bottle of Green Oil* or face cream or something, just to feel that they at least are getting something back on their investment. But having medical insurance is much, much better than not having it if you do get sick. Also, the factory occasionally organizes excursions, flower arrangement courses, or folk dance classes, and they sometimes offer small scholarships.”

* A strongly scented oil applied to the skin for refreshment when tired.

“You’d better think very, very carefully before deciding to go work at a place like this – don’t do it on a whim. You’re at the master level of your job here; if you work fast you can earn more. If you change to a big factory, you’ll have to start all over again and be retrained as a beginner. But the hours *are* too long here. Let me go and see what I can do.”

Both my sister and brother-in-law started out as entry-level factory workers. Now they’ve paid their dues and have taken their reward as factory owners. Sometimes I ask myself, if I were a factory owner, whether I’d take better care of my workers. Maybe not. In this society, if you have a way to make a little more money, who wouldn’t want to make a little more money? We started out getting NT\$2.50 per cap that we finished, and my brother-in-law got NT\$2.50 per cap too. Now everything has gone up in price. Our NT\$2.50 per cap is still NT\$2.50 per cap, but my brother-in-law seems to be better off than he used to be. He’s repaid all his loans, and has added two new machines and a delivery truck.

When Chun-hsia informed my brother-in-law that A-Tsai and the rest were thinking of leaving, my brother-in-law panicked, then agreed that everybody would work overtime only three days of the week, but if anyone wanted to work extra to earn more, they were free to do so. Everybody was happy at this news. A-Tsai and the rest shelved their plans for changing jobs for the time being. But my sister still walked around with her face in a knot, complaining behind my brother-in-law’s back that he agreed to anything that came out of the mouth of the “lady from Taipei”.

During this period I started giving a lot of thought to going back to school. If I got myself a better education, I bet I would really be hot stuff. Take my Mandarin, for example – I speak it much better than any of the other elementary school graduates. It really does make a difference if you speak Mandarin well; like once when I was on a bus and called out in Taiwanese, “Conductor, I get off here”, she didn’t pay any attention to me. Then I said in Mandarin, “Ma’am, I get off here” and the bus pulled over neatly at my stop. I get the feeling that speaking Taiwanese makes people think you’re from the country, but speaking Mandarin projects style, poise, sophistication. Chun-hsia speaks very good Mandarin, and has a good education. Her husband and even my brother-in-law treat her with courtesy and respect.

Lee also encouraged me to go to night school and finish junior high. He said that after completing his military service his father planned on buying some machinery and opening a factory in their home. “I hope to marry a junior high school graduate who can take of the accounting,” he said. I’ve been to his house. All his sisters-in-law are junior high school graduates. If I married into their family with less education than they have, I know I’d be looked down on by them.

The day before yesterday I told my sister and brother-in-law that after this summer I planned on enrolling in a junior high school evening program. My sister couldn’t hold it in any longer, and screamed at me:

“There’s someone here creating disturbances every few days – I’m going to let that one from Taipei go. We had night school students come to us looking for work before, and we turned them down. Not only are they not available to work overtime in

the evening, but they even ask for time off during exam time!”

Chun-hsia didn't wait for my sister to make her move. Yesterday Chun-hsia quietly packed her bags. No matter how my brother-in-law tried to persuade her, and no matter how the rest of us begged her with tears to stay, nothing could shake her resolution to leave.

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The sun is shining high overhead, its sharp, rays piercing my eyes and heart like arrows. I've cried my eyes dry, but my heart is still bleeding. I was sick and tired of this job long ago, but stayed on for my sister's sake. Who would've thought that after all that hard work, it was in the end nothing to her, and we'd end up as enemies. My mother admonished us, saying sisters who couldn't get along would cause a scandal; my father said I wanted to take it easy, and go find myself a boyfriend. What do they know about my dreams, about how I want to make a better life for myself? People say that seventeen and eighteen are a girl's golden years – so why am I in such pain?

If I leave, where will I go?

I'm sure my mom would be worried sick if I headed for the big city all by myself, and Chun-hsia has said that big factories aren't everything they're cracked up to be. The pay is low, expenses are high, and you end up making just enough to keep yourself alive. Then what about the needs of the rest of the family? Staying here in the country I can at least go home often and unload my troubles on Mom. Even though my father doesn't pay much attention to me, he at least doesn't neglect me completely. If I were to go into the city to work, I'd probably end up being ignored by the rest of the family. And could I be happy living by myself, for myself?

If I left my sister's factory and found a position in another factory in the country, it would bring embarrassment to the family, and people would talk. And I'm at the master level in making caps; anything else I'd have to learn from the very beginning – it wouldn't be worth it. The owners of other cap factories all know my brother-in-law, and would certainly not stick out their necks by giving me a job at their shop. And even if I took a job somewhere else, things would be the same – I'd still have to work overtime. And you get no special attention when you work for someone who's not related to you.

Ay! Maybe I should just go and get married after all, try out a new environment, not have to work in a factory. But Lee still has his military service ahead of him, and marrying into that family I'd have somebody telling me what to do at every turn; I wouldn't be free to do what I want like I am in my own home. My father wouldn't let me marry this young anyway; he wants me to keep bringing in money for the family for a few more years...unless of course Lee and I went ahead and... Damn. How did I end up at *this* point in my thoughts?

The stream flows gently beneath my feet, on and on and on. Someday this water will reach the deep blue ocean and form gigantic, rolling waves. The lucky fish in the ocean can go and swim and explore wherever they please.

Not far from here an ox opens its big dry eyes and chews on its cud. On my way to grade school one day, I saw by chance an ox pulling a cart, shedding heavy tears as it lumbered by.

So oxen feel sadness and shed tears too? An egret alights on the ox's back, the ox swishes its tail, and now the egret has flown over close to me. Little Egret, have you come to bring me comfort? How I wish your wings could carry me, let me soar through the boundless sky. Tell me: Where is Chun-hsia? Are there still dreams, is there still hope for Chun-hsia, for me, for the rest?