A LONE AMOROUS FLOWER

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(“KU LIEN HUA”)

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Love’s Lone Flower
In the past, every night when Peach Blossom and I got done
at the Mayflower, the two of us would go home together.

Sometimes, on summer nights, we'd hail a pedicab and take
a slow ride back to our little apartment on Chin-hua Street.

It's different now. How I usually go back first, by myself,
prepare a midnight snack and wait up for Peach Blossom

Sometimes I wait until dawn.

I spent my whole life savings to buy this little
Chin-hua Street apartment. Back in Shanghai, when I was
with the Myriad Springs Pavilion, I did manage to save
a few dollars. I'd been in the life much longer than
Precious Fifth and the rest of them. I was the one who
took care of Precious Fifth, showed her all the ropes,
and got her to stand up for herself. But by the time I fled
to Taiwan I had lost most everything except for a pair
of emerald jade bracelets I'd been wearing all the time.

That pair of bracelets was left to me by Precious Fifth;
no matter what hardships and dangers I went through,
I could never bear to part with them.

Juan-juan? Maybe, for a change, transliteration
is called for, that not in the W-5 Chiiian chiiian.
I didn’t really want to be with the Mayflower. When I first got to Taiwan I used to hang out with racketeers like Yu the Hunk and run hot goods for the black market. Who could have known we’d be raided not once but many times in a row at the Keelung docks? Not only did the Hunk lose his own stash but my jewelry went as well. Finally the Hunk had the nerve to try to rip those bracelets off my arms! I grabbed a pair of long scissors, aimed them at him and shouted, you just try and lay a finger on these! He spat right in my face and slashed back, You cheap whore! I’ve been in this business for all my life in that business, that’s the one word I can’t stand, especially out of a man’s mouth, it stinks. It’s not an easy life in a wine parlor, let me tell you.

The boss at the Mayflower was impressed with me. I’d had plenty of experience, I knew how to handle people. I knew a little Peking opera, too, so he’d send me specially to take care of those honorable gents from the Mainland and sing a few arias to keep them happy. Occasionally I’d run into some of my old Shanghai clients, they’d still call me "Fragrant Cloud Number Six." Once I happened
to meet Ninth Master Lu, the minute he saw me, he stamped his foot and sighed, as if to say what a pity.

"Sixth, luv, how the devil did you land back in a hole like this?"

I smiled at him. "Well, Ninth Master, I guess that's just my fate, isn't it."

You really should give me credit. A Mainlander like me, thrown in with those little Taiwanese chicks at the Mayflower and still able to come up by some dough over the years. Quite an accomplishment, I'd say. Later, I sweet talked the boss into making me one of the managers to look after the girls. Among all the managers at the Mayflower Flower, Hu and I are the only women; the rest of them, a bunch of hoods. It doesn't bother me really. I've been mixing among ranks of men all my life, been doing just fine. I'm quite used to tackling them, to tell you the truth. The guests have given me the title "Commander-in-Chief." they say I've got all the top brass under my command. Princess Beauty, Heart Plum, the lot, just like in the Army, the Navy and the Air Force. As a manager all I get is my
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I couldn't stand to squeeze too much flesh-peddling money from those little chicks, so I became a lot more hard up than before. In the end I had to call in and tried figuring this way and that, still I was forced to part with those two emerald jade bracelets so I could raise enough money to buy the little apartment on Chin-hua Street. I did it all for Peach Bud's sake.

Peach Bud used to be one of Mousie's girls. She was new at the Mayflower, so I'd run into her several times all right, but I'd never paid much attention to her. To tell the truth, when those Mayflower girls are all dolled up, they are all so buried under powder and rouge you can't tell one from another. Then, one winter night, over a year ago, I went up to Room 313 on the third floor on my rounds. As I pushed the door open, there stood Peach Bud. She was singing a Taiwanese ballad. Half the table was occupied by Japanese johns; they were really whooping it up with Princess Beauty and Heart Plum and those other hot numbers, some clutching them around

\[\text{Chinese May term and the alliteration: 根據 me!}\]
The whole room stank of cigarette smoke, wine, and men; no one was really listening to Peach Bud sing. She stood in a corner, in a black satin cheongsam with a small white capelet; her hair hung down to her shoulders, her waist was pulled in so tight you could span it with one hand. Behind her grouped three musicians, Lin San-lang in the lead. Blinking his ulcerated, nearly blind eyes, he accompanied Peach Bud on his old, beat-up, utterly worn-out accordion, that gave out a plaintive, wheezing tone. She was singing "A Lone Amorous Flower." Her head to one side, her face tilted upward, eyes closed, eyebrows knit together, her long hair fallen over one shoulder, she sang in a thin, quivering voice, not really knowing for whom she sang:

The moon is sinking in the west,

With all my heart of you I'm thinking --

A tender bush; who cares to tend it?

From my fallen leaves

the pains of love will growing...
This ballad was composed by Lin Sanlang himself. During the Japanese occupation he was a famous musician and he wrote his own songs, too. They say he fell in love with a wine-paillon girl, "White Jade Pavilion," at the P'eng-lai Palace; she was an epileptic, she fell into the Tamsui River and drowned. In memory of her, he wrote "A Lone Amorous Flower." Embracing that accordion of his, its keys turned oily and yellow, blinking those ulcer-reddening eyes, he kept pulling out that same song day in and day out. I've heard that song sung by God knows how many girls in the Mayflower, but not one of them sang with as much bitter sorrow as Peach Bud, note by note as if she was pleading all the wrongs she'd suffered. I don't know why, but the way she looked all at once reminded me of Precious Fifth. Peach Bud and Precious Fifth didn't really resemble each other that much; Precious Fifth had finer features, yet when Precious Fifth sang opera, she had that same sorrowful look. In those days, when we were called out to banquet performances, we would always like to sing "Reincarnate Lovers" together. I was the heroine, "Princess Beauty."
and Precious Fifth played the lady's maid, "Bright Snow." Precious Fifth liked to knit her brows; took one passage in the tragic Erh-huang mode and she seemed to pour out all her grievances straight from her heart. Both of them had pinched, triangular faces, pointed chins, high cheekbones, sunken eyes; both of them had that look of being destined to drift downward to a tragic fate.

The instant Peach Bud finished singing, a stubby baij Japanese john snatched her around the waist and sat her down on his lap; he forced a cup of wine down her throat first thing, when she finished he poured her another and pushed her on to the next guest for a drinking bout. Peach Bud didn't put up a fight at all; she lifted her cup and gulped the wine in one breath. She swallowed it, wiped away the drops in the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand, looked at the guest and gave him a smile. I saw that shadow of a smile float across her small, pale, triangular face; it was sadder than weeping. I'd never seen a wine parlor girl let herself be pushed around
so easily by those Johns. Now my girls Princess Beauty and Heart Plum, for instance, it would take a helluva lot of doing before a john could force anything down their throats. But Peach Bud just let those Japanese S.O.B.s shuttle her around and pour wine down her throat; she didn't resist, she didn't even protest; after a cup she'd smack her lips and smile helplessly. As her round drew to a close she'd already downed seven or eight cups of Shaohsing, her face even turned greenish. Before she left, she stood up and excused herself, nodding to the Johns who'd ganged up on her. That sad, stiff smile floated across her face again.

That evening, after I'd taken care of business and was ready to leave, I went to the bathroom on the third floor. I opened the door; I was stunned: there on the floor, on her back, lay Peach Bud, dead drunk, her face ashen, her black satin cheongsam spattered all over with vomit. The faucet hadn't been turned off and the water was spilling over onto the floor; Peach Bud's hair was drenched, dripping
wet. I rushed over to prop her up, took my coat off and wrapped it around her. That night I took Peach Bud back to my apartment; at the time I was still living by myself on Ningpo West Street.

I washed Peach Bud up, changed her clothes and put her to bed in my bed; she was out cold the whole time, still shivering as though she had a chill. I got out a heavy quilt, covered her up and tucked it around her chin. Suddenly I realized how many years it was since I'd done that. Back when Precious Fifth and I slept together in the same room, I often used to get up in the middle of the night and put her covers back on. She could only handle two cups of wine; when she was called out to drink with gents, she'd come home totally pie-eyed. In her sleep, whenever the aftereffect of the wine got to her and made her hot and restless, she'd kick off all her covers. I'd always get a blanket out and wrap her up real snug. Sometimes she got beat up and hurt by that old reptile of a pimp, Hua the Third, and she couldn't sleep well and I had to get up several times during the night.
I tried to give her some advice she'd thrust her arm out from under the covers up at my face with a scornful smile.

"This is my lot, Sister."

Stamped on her snow-white arm was a row of coin-size blisters Hua the Third had branded on her with his opium pipe. When I saw she was in terrible pain, I would lie beside her and give her a massage and keep her company until daybreak. I felt Peach Bud's forehead; it was icy, kept sending out cold sweat, she'd drunk herself sick for sure, she tossed and turned the whole night, she had a restless sleep.

The next day, Peach Bud woke at dawn. Her face looked ghastly pale, her eyes were flashing; she said she had a splitting headache. I got up to boil a bowl of ginger soup with brown sugar to feed her in bed. She sat up and I wrapped a quilted jacket around her shoulders. She just drank half of it, didn't want any more. Head lowered, she rubbed her temples vigorously, her long hair falling forward, hiding her face. After a while, without looking up she suddenly said, "I saw my mother in a dream again." Her
voice sounded very strange, faraway, hollow, each word fading off.

"Where is she now?" I sat down next to her.

"I don't know." She looked up, shaking her long hair.

"Maybe she's still in our Su-ao countryside — she's a madwoman."

"Ohh — " I stretched out my hand to wipe away the beads of cold sweat springing out on her forehead. I noticed Peach Bud's eyes also looked very strange; they were dark and deep; even when she stared blankly her eyes were still full of fear, her pupils like two black tadpoles darting about.

"My father put an iron chain around her neck and locked her in the pigsty. When I was little I didn't know she was my momma. My father never told me. And he wouldn't let me go near her. When I went to feed the pigs, I often saw the neighbors' kids pick up rocks and throw them at her; when she got hit she'd raise her hands like claws and gnash her teeth and howl. The kids laughed, and I laughed with them — — " Peach Bud laughed nervously, her small, pale, triangular face slightly distorted. "One day, look — "
She pulled her collar open and pointed down at her throat; there lay a red scar, as thick as your finger, like a shiny earthworm.

"One day my aunt came, she took me to the pigsty, and she told me, through her sobs, 'That's her, that's your mother!' That evening I got together a bowl of food on the quiet, crawled into the pigsty and handed it to my ma. She took ahold of it, stared at me for a while and grinned. I moved up and stroked her face with my hand, but the minute I touched her she let out a bloodcurdling wail, dashing the bowl to the ground she reached out her claws and in one swoop grabbed me before I could make a sound her teeth were already sinking into my throat ———

Peach Bud laughed nervously again, her two tadpole pupils jumping. I hugged her around her shoulders and caressed that scar on her throat; all of a sudden I felt that red earthworm-like scar turn slippery, as if it were beginning to squirm.

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Once Precious Fifth and I made a wish: in days to come, when we'd saved up enough money, we'd buy a house, live together and make it our home. We'd also said we were going to redeem a little virgin singsong girl and bring her up as our own. Precious Fifth had been kidnapped from the Yangchow countryside by a white-slaver. When she was sold to the Myriad Springs Pavilion she was only fourteen; in a flower-print cotton jacket and pants with drawstrings pulled tight at the ankles; her hair cut in a pageboy, fastened with a copper butterfly hairpin.

"Where's your mother, Precious Fifth?" I'd asked her.

"I haven't got a mother." She smiled.

"Silly," I scolded her. "You haven't got a mother? Who gave birth to you?"

"Oh, I don't remember." She waved her short hair around and tittered. I caught her to my bosom, held her cheeks and gave her a couple of kisses. From then on I grew to feel a maternal pity and tenderness for her.

"Peach Bud, this is our home now."
That's what I told her, my arm around her shoulders, when we moved into our little apartment on Chin-hua Street. Precious Fifth died early, so that wish of ours never came true. I spent half my life knocking around until I met Peach Bud; only then did the idea of building a home come back to me. I just let things slide, never got used to doing the laundry and cooking and all that housekeeping business, but I thought Peach Bud was too frail for the heavy work, so I wouldn't let her do too much around the house. Every day she slept way into the afternoon, and yet I couldn't bear to wake her up. Especially when she came back from turning a trick, she looked so worn out my heart went out to her. Don't I know it! When men get into bed there isn't one dirty trick they won't pull. One time some old mother-fucker damn near strangled me with his hands around my neck, and he got sore, that bastard kept asking me, Why don't you pant? Why aren't you panting? The evening of Precious Fifth's initiation, the dude who copped her cherry was an army man,
strong as an ox. The morning after, Precious Fifth crawled into my bed, rolled against my bosom and cried her eyes bloodshot, her tiny little breasts black and blue, all covered with toothmarks.

"Who was the one who deflowered you, Peach Bud?"

Once when Peach Bud got up very late after a call, I asked her as I was combing her hair.

"My father."

I stood behind her and just kept on combing her hair, without a sound.

"Whenever my father got drunk he'd come straight into my room . . ." She talked with a cigarette in her mouth, an exhausted look on her face. "I was just fifteen then; the first night, I got scared and I bit him. He grabbed me and began knocking my head so hard against the headboard my head swam and I blacked out. From then on, every time he'd bring me back some rouge and lipstick from Ilan and sweet-talk me into doing it with him ——— "

Peach Bud laughed drily, the cigarette in her mouth bobbing up and down.
"When I got knocked up, my father kept dragging me to the door every day. He pointed his finger right in my face in front of all the neighbors and cursed me out. 'You slut! Been sleeping around, huh?' I felt my swollen belly. I got frightened and started to cry. My father got hold of a handful of bitter herbs and crammed it down my throat. That night I dropped a clot of blood —"

As she said it, she giggled nervously again; her face was all twisted till you couldn't tell her eyes from her eyebrows. Gently I caressed her bony back; I felt as though I was stroking a sick kitten with only one of its lives left that someone had thrown out on a pile of garbage, and left to die. After Peach Bud got through dressing we left for the Mayflower. On the street I watched her long hair blow about in the evening wind, her tiny waist swayed this way and that as if it would snap at any moment. At the entrance of the street we ran up against a huge setting sun, as if it had just rolled out of a dying-vat, it made Peach Bud's pale triangular face appear splashed with blood.

From the cast of her face, I had a secret feeling means almost breasting bud day.
a dark fate awaited her. How many unatoned-for sins from former lives, I wondered, weighed upon this swaying, fragile body?

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It's only recently that Peach Bud's begun staying out all night. One hot, humid night in June, I was lying in bed; I hadn't slept a wink all night waiting for her; I watched it grow light little by little outside the window, my back soaking wet. Peach Bud didn't come home until seven or eight in the morning, reeling from side to side as if she was still drunk, her face white with fatigue, her mascara run and spread into two big black circles, as if her eyebrows and eyes had decomposed. She walked into the room, without a word she kicked off her high heels, struggling out of her cheongsam she fell back onto the bed, her eyes closed, and lay there, totally inert. I sat down next to her and took off her bra; her nipples had been bitten through and swelled up like two overripe oxblood plums; there was a sticky substance oozing from them.
On her neck was a ring of blue toothmarks that made her earthworm-like red scar stand out even more. I lifted her arm. To my horror I saw a row of four or five black needle-marks in the vein.

"Peach Bud!" I called to her.

"Yama-K'o Lao-hsiung —" Peach Bud muttered, her eyes closed. She turned her head away and passed out.

As I kept watch by her side, all at once everything that had happened at the Mayflower the night before last flashed across my mind. That night when K'o Lao-hsiung, nicknamed the king of Hell came to the Mayflower I had sent Princess Beauty and Heart Plum over; he didn't want either of them; he told them to "fuck off;" for some reason he had his eye on Peach Bud. Three years ago he was a regular at the Mayflower, a smuggler, a gambler, and a dope addict into the bargain; there was nothing he wouldn't do. A known underworld capo, all right. He was a big spender in those days, had gone through quite a number of wine-parlor girls; there was one called Graceful Phoenix who had shacked up with him less than a month and then suddenly she was dead.
There was a lot of talk around the Mayflower that he was her Cause of Death, so he stayed out of sight for a couple of years. When he came back this time he was twice as nasty, more ferocious than ever. By the time Peach Bud was there on her round, he was already eighty percent loaded, in with a gang of card-sharks every one of them shouting all kinds of filth. Yama took off his shirt baring his dark-red, massive arms, showing the two big clumps of dark hair under his armpits; his belt loosened, his fly half down. A skinhead, the back of his enormous head shaved shiny, on his crown a tuft of hair stiff, erect, like pig bristles. He had a big, mean jaw that stuck out like a carp's gills; a pair of pig eyes, bloodshot, eyelids swollen, his dark thick lips pushed out, showing a mouthful of gold teeth. His head was aswet, his body was aswet; before I got near him I was already attacked by that smell of his that stank of fish.

As Peach Bud came near him he rolled his pig eyes and sized her up from head to toe. Without warning he stretched out a dark-red, massive arm, seized Peach Bud by the hand
and pulled her toward him. He grinned, his gold teeth flashing. Peach Bud lost her balance and fell right into his lap. His bare arm clutching her tiny waist, he tried to pour a cup of wine down her throat; before she'd finished it he snatched the cup out of her hand; smacking his lips he drained the rest. He thrust his nose out and sniffed around Peach Bud's neck; one hand pawed her breasts; then abruptly he pulled Peach Bud's arm up, stuck out his tongue and gave her armpit a quick lick. Peach Bud couldn't help but let out a piercing laugh, her feet kicking violently.

Yama just wouldn't relax his grip; he caught her hand and pulled it down below his belly.

"Afraid?" he leered.

The Johns around the table cackled. Peach Bud struggled wildly; in Yama's arm her slender waist twisted as if it had broken in two. I could see those tadpole eyes of hers in her pale face about to leap out in panic.

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I don't understand what it is in Peach Bud's fate
that's brought about such a retribution, that's attracted such demons. Ever since she got mixed up with Yama it's as if her soul was taken away. Whenever he came to the Mayflower to pick her up she'd go along meekly; every time she came back she was all bruises, her arms were stuck full of needlemarks. I did everything I could to stop her; I told her just how dangerous these underworld thugs are. Peach Bud just looked at me vacantly, as if she were under a spell.

"Don't you understand? Peach Bud!?" Sometimes I got so worked up I would shake her violently by the shoulders. Then she would shake her head and smile sadly.

"I can't help it, Commander — "

Without a stitch on except her bra, she'd go sit on the window-sill; she hunched over, one leg drawn up, picked up a bottle of Cutex and began painting her toenails while she plaintively hummed snatches of "Yearning for You,"

"Three Forlorn Sighs," those weepy ballads, her voice hollow, like a widow wailing. Every few lines she'd blow her nose with a wad of kleenex. She's become addicted to morphine.
Yama took Peach Bud to a hotel once and she got picked up by the police as a hooker. I had to spend quite a bit of money before I could bail her out. From then on I wanted Peach Bud to bring Yama home; at least he wouldn't dare to get nasty with her at my place. I'm always afraid one day Peach Bud will lose her life to that King of Hell. A couple of times I've taken her horoscope to be read; they've all said she's got an extraordinarily violent destiny.

Every time they come home I excuse myself and go into the kitchen; I can't stand the sight of those gold teeth. They remind me of that pimp Hua the Third. When he beat Precious Fifth up, he'd bare all his gold teeth and curse, I'll beat you to death, you stinking whore! While I'm in the kitchen stewing the lovage-tonic chicken for Peach Bud's late-night snack I keep my ears open all the time; I hear Yama's lewd laugh, his bark, Peach Bud's agonized whimpering like a sick kitten; not until Yama leaves do I draw Peach Bud's bath and go into the room to see her. One time I went in only to find her
sitting mother-naked on the bed, holding a wad of crisp hundred-dollar bills, counting this way and that way, over and over, like a little child playing with bubble-gum cards. I went up close and saw a dark-red spot of dried blood, as big as a fingernail, on her small face by the corner of her mouth.

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On the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, the Ghost Festival, it's finally happened.

This evening, Yama had taken Peach Bud off to the town of Sanchung for the wild jamboree. I came home earlier than usual, bought silverfoil ingots and candles, prepared four sacrificial dishes and took them to the terrace behind the kitchen to offer to Precious Fifth. The night was so hot it made you feel dizzy; the whole sky looked as if it had been scorched; even the huge moon had turned red. By the time I'd finished burning the ingots I was dripping with sweat; my cheeks grew feverish. One doesn't usually think about it, but when I counted I realized
it's already fifteen years since Precious Fifth died. Whenever I think about her, it's as if everything is right before my eyes: the way she lay on Hua the Third's opium couch, dead, her mouth stuffed with opium scum, her eyes wide open; I can still see it. Over and over Precious Fifth had sworn: I'll turn into a ghost and hunt him down!

It was almost midnight before Yamak came in dragging Peach Bud along, both of them reeling, his face flushed purple. Damn your mother's soul! the minute he walked in he spat and cursed. He literally yanked Peach Bud off the ground and took her into the other room. As I sat in the kitchen I felt a burning in my heart; I simply couldn't calm down no matter how hard I tried. This time Yamak's howls turned savage, and now and again there were sounds of a scuffle. The scene right before Precious Fifth's suicide suddenly reappeared — Precious Fifth sits down hard on the floor in Hua the Third's room; Hua grabs her by the hair and keeps twisting her head around as if he's turning a handmill; the copper opium pipe in his hand slashing down at her, sending out
a shower of gold sparks. I see her two hands in the air
swinging and grasping like mad, and then comes her scream
for dear life, SISTER — I smash the window with my fists.
with all my strength. The broken glass cuts my hands;
blood comes — an ear-piercing shriek made me start up
in fright. Catching up a cleaver I rushed into the other
room. As I burst through the door, it was Peach Bud,
stark naked, who rode astride Yamada's body. He
lay flat on the floor; he was naked, too. She raised a
black flatiron in her two hands and hammered it down on
Yamada's skull. Thump, thump, thump, one blow
after another. Her long hair flying, her mouth wide open,
shrieking like a wildcat gone mad. Yamada's skull
was split open, his grayish brains, like beancurd dregs,
splashed all over the floor; that tuft of pig's bristle
hair on his crown still intact, stuck there; those dark-
red massive arms of his thrust up in the air, quivering.
Peach Bud's bluish-white breasts thrashed up and down,
spotted with blood. Riding on Yamada's dark-red
corpse, her thin white body all of a sudden grew larger
and larger. A wave of dizziness washed over me; the cleaver in my hand dropped to the floor.

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Peach Bud's case never went to court: she had gone completely insane. They've locked her up in an asylum by the sea, in Hsinchu. It was more than two months after I filed my application before they gave me permission to see her. Third-Son Lin San-lang came along to keep me company. When Peach Bud was at the Mayflower, Lin San-lang was really fond of her and taught her many Taiwanese ballads. That song he wrote, "A Lone Amorous Flower," Lin taught her himself.

We got to see Peach Bud at the Hsinchu asylum. They had handcuffs on her; they said she bit people. They had her hair cut short, to ear length, curling up around the ends; it made her look like a fifteen-or-sixteen-year-old little girl. She was wearing a gray cotton robe with a low neck; that earthworm-like red scar on her throat showed. She didn't know us any more; only after I called her name
several times did she smile a little. That triangular little face of hers looked even paler and thinner. But, oddly enough, her smile no longer had that touch of sadness; instead she had taken on a dash of mad childlike innocence. We stayed for a while, but we didn't have much to say. I left her a basket of apples I'd bought; Lin San-lang brought her two boxes of Water Pavilion cookies. Two male nurses ushered her inside; I knew they would never let her out again, ever.

When Lin San-lang and I left the asylum it was already dusk; the sea breeze had blown sand up onto the road; when the setting sun shone on it it looked like a cloud of yellow dust. It was quite a walk to the bus station, and since Lin San-lang was almost completely blind he could only walk very slowly. He wore dark glasses and guided himself with a cane. I held onto his arm, the two of us trudged along step by step down along the endless dirt road. There was no one in sight; on both sides of the road one stretch of paddy-field followed another. The autumn harvest was already over; all that was left standing in the parched
fields were clusters of withered stalks. After we'd been walking for some time, I suddenly began to feel lonely.

"Third-Son,

'San-lang, sing your song 'A Lone Amorous Flower' for me."

"All right, Commander."

Lin San-lang cleared his throat, in a falsetto, imitating those wine-parlor girls, softly he began to hum

"A Lone Amorous Flower."