

WAITING

W A I T I N G

H A J I N

Copyright © 1999 by Ha Jin

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Pantheon Books and colophon are registered trademarks of
Random House, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jin, Ha, 1956—

Waiting / Ha Jin.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-375-40653-0

1. China—History—1949–1976 Fiction. I. Title.

PS3560. 16W34 1999

813'.54—dc21 99-21334

CIP

Random House Web Address: www.randomhouse.com

Book design by Deborah Kerner

Printed in the United States of America

4 6 8 9 7 5 3

PANTHEON BOOKS
NEW YORK

FOR LISHA
ALONE AND TOGETHER

WAITING

P R O L O G U E

Every summer Lin Kong returned to Goose Village to divorce his wife, Shuyu. Together they had appeared at the courthouse in Wujia Town many times, but she had always changed her mind at the last moment when the judge asked if she would accept a divorce. Year after year, they went to Wujia Town and came back with the same marriage license issued to them by the county's registry office twenty years before.

This summer Lin Kong returned with a new letter of recommendation for divorce, which had been provided for him by the army hospital in Muji City, where he served as a doctor. Once more he planned to take his wife to the courthouse and end their marriage. Before he left for home, he had promised Manna Wu, his girlfriend at the hospital, that this time he would try his best to make Shuyu stick to her word after she agreed to a divorce.

As an officer, he had a twelve-day leave each year. Since the trip home took a whole day—he had to change trains and buses at two towns—he could stay in the countryside only ten days, saving the last day for the return trip. Before taking this year's leave, he had thought that once home, he would have enough time to carry out his plan, but by now a whole week had passed and he had not yet mentioned a word to his wife about the divorce. Whenever the subject came to his tongue, he postponed it for another day.

Their adobe house was the same as two decades before, four large rooms under a thatched roof and three square windows facing south with their frames painted sky blue. Lin stood in the yard facing the front wall while flipping over a dozen mildewed books he had left to be sunned on a stack of firewood. Sure thing, he thought,

Shuyu doesn't know how to take care of books. Maybe I should give them to my nephews. These books are of no use to me anymore.

Beside him, chickens were strutting and geese waddling. A few little chicks were passing back and forth through the narrow gaps in the paling that fenced a small vegetable garden. In the garden pole beans and long cucumbers hung on trellises, eggplants curved like ox horns, and lettuce heads were so robust that they covered up the furrows. In addition to the poultry, his wife kept two pigs and a goat for milk. Their sow was oinking from the pigpen, which was adjacent to the western end of the vegetable garden. Against the wall of the pigpen a pile of manure waited to be carted to their family plot, where it would go through high-temperature composting in a pit for two months before being put into the field. The air reeked of distillers' grains mixed in the pig feed. Lin disliked the sour smell, which was the only uncomfortable thing to him here. From the kitchen, where Shuyu was cooking, came the coughing of the bellows. In the south, elm and birch crowns shaded their neighbors' straw and tiled roofs. Now and then a dog barked from one of these homes.

Having turned over all the books, Lin went out of the front wall, which was three feet high and topped with thorny jujube branches. In one hand he held a dog-eared Russian dictionary he had used in high school. Having nothing to do, he sat on their grinding stone, thumbing through the old dictionary. He still remembered some Russian vocabulary and even tried to form a few short sentences in his mind with some words. But he couldn't recall the grammatical rules for the case changes exactly, so he gave up and let the book lie on his lap. Its pages fluttered a little as a breeze blew across. He raised his eyes to watch the villagers hoeing potatoes in a distant field, which was so vast that a red flag was planted in the middle of it as a marker, so that they could take a break when they reached the flag. Lin was fascinated by the sight, but he knew little about farm

work. He had left the village for high school in Wujia Town at the age of sixteen.

An oxcart emerged down the road, loaded high with millet sheaves and swaying as it rolled along. The lead animal was a mere heifer, slightly lame in her hind leg. Lin saw his daughter Hua and another girl on top of the load, both partly buried in the fluffy sheaves. The girls were singing and laughing. The driver, an old man in a blue serge cap, was holding a pipe between his teeth and flicking his short whip over the shaft bullock's hindquarters. The two iron-rimmed wheels were screeching rhythmically on the bumpy road.

As the cart came to a stop at the front gate, Hua dropped a bulging burlap sack to the ground and jumped down. "Thanks, Uncle Yang," she called out to the driver. Waving at the plump girl atop the load, she cried, "See you this evening." Then she brushed bits of straw from her shirt and pants.

Both the old man and the plump girl looked at Lin, smiling at him without a word. Lin vaguely remembered the driver, but couldn't tell what family the girl belonged to. He was aware that they didn't greet him the way the villagers would do one another. The man didn't shout, "How's your day, buddy?" And the girl didn't say, "How are you, Uncle?" Perhaps this was because he was wearing the army uniform, he thought.

"What's in the sack?" he asked his daughter, getting up from the grinding stone.

"Mulberry leaves," she said.

"For the silkworms?"

"Yes." Hua seemed reluctant to talk with him. She raised some silkworms in the shack behind their house, in three large wicker baskets.

"Is it heavy?" he asked.

"No."

"Can I help?" Lin hoped she would say a few words to him before she went in.

"No, I can carry it myself."

With both hands she swung the large sack over her shoulder. Her round eyes gazed at his face for a moment, then with a casual gait she walked away. He noticed that her forearms were sunburned, spotted with whitish peeled skin. How tall and strong she was, obviously a good farmhand.

Again her gaze disturbed him. He was unsure whether her petulance had been caused by his attempt to divorce her mother. He felt that was unlikely, because he had not yet broached the subject this year. He was unhappy that his daughter seemed somewhat estranged from him now. When she was a baby girl, she had been very attached to him and they had often played together whenever he came home. As she grew older, she became more reticent and remote from him. Now she seldom said an unnecessary word to him, and at most she would give him a thin smile. Does she really hate me? he wondered. She's grown up already, and in a few years she'll have her own family, no need for an old man like me.

In fact Lin looked quite young for his age. He was in his late forties, but he did not seem like a middle-aged man. Despite the uniform, he resembled an official more than an officer. His pale face was smooth and handsome with a pair of black-rimmed glasses on his straight nose. By contrast, his wife Shuyu was a small, withered woman and looked much older than her age. Her thin arms and legs couldn't fill up her clothes, which were always baggy on her. In addition, she had bound feet and sometimes wore black puttees. Her dark hair was coiled into a severe bun on the back of her head, giving her a rather gaunt face. Her mouth was sunken, though her dark eyes were not bad-looking, like a pair of tadpoles. In every way the couple did not match.

"Shuyu, can we talk about the divorce?" Lin asked his wife after

dinner. Hua had just left to study with her friends, preparing herself for the entrance exams for a trade school in Harbin.

"All right," his wife said calmly.

"Can we go to town tomorrow?"

"All right."

"You always say 'all right,' but you'll change your mind afterward. Can you keep your word this time?"

She turned silent. They had never quarreled, and she would agree to anything he said. "Shuyu," he went on, "you know, I need a home in the army. It's hard to live by myself there. I'm no longer a young man."

She nodded without a word.

"Will you say yes to the judge this time?" he asked.

"All right."

A hush fell in the room again. He resumed reading the country's newspaper, *Country Constructs*, while his fingertips silently drummed the tabletop.

Shuyu was making a jacket for their daughter, cutting a piece of black corduroy with a pair of scissors and a stub of French chalk. Two yellow moths were circling around the 25-watt bulb hanging from the papered ceiling. On the whitewashed wall, the shadow of the lamp cord severed the picture of a baby boy, fat and naked in a red bib, riding a large carp in billowing waves. On the mat-covered brick bed were two folded quilts and three dark pillows like huge loaves of bread. The sound of frogs croaking came from the pond at the southern end of the village while cicadas' chirping seeped in through the screen window. A bell tolled from the production brigade's office, summoning the commune members to a meeting.

Twenty-one years before, in 1962, Lin had been a student in a military medical school in Shenyang City. One day in the summer he received a letter from his father, which said his mother was very ill and their house had been neglected because the old man had to

work in the fields of the commune most of the time. His father wanted Lin to get married soon so that his bride could look after his mother. Out of filial duty, Lin agreed to let his parents find a wife for him.

After a month's talking with an old matchmaker, they settled on the eldest daughter of the Lius, a family that had recently moved to Goose Village from Lokou County. Since Lin was a college student and would soon become a doctor and officer, Shuyu's parents did not ask for any gift or money and were pleased to marry her to him. Lin's parents mailed him a black-and-white snapshot of Shuyu, and he agreed to be engaged, feeling she was a fine, normal girl. She was twenty-six, just a year younger than himself.

But when he returned home in the winter and saw his fiancée in person, he was dismayed—she looked so old, as if in her forties, her face wrinkled and her hands leathery. What is more, her feet were only four inches long. This was the New China; who would look up to a young woman with bound feet? He tried reasoning with his parents to get out of the engagement, but they were adamant and said he was silly. How could they break the engagement without proving that Shuyu couldn't be a suitable wife? Had they done that, the whole village would have turned against them.

"Can good looks feed a family?" his father asked sullenly.

"My son," his mother said from her sickbed, "a pretty face fades in a couple of years. It's personality that lasts. Shuyu will be a good helper for you."

"How can you tell?" Lin asked.

"I know that in my heart."

His father said, "Where can you find such a kindhearted girl?"

"Please," the mother begged. "I'll die happy if I know you agree to marry her."

So Lin yielded to his parents. But despite accepting Shuyu as his

bride, he believed she was absolutely unpresentable outside his home village. That was why, after they were married the next summer, for two decades he had never let her visit him at the army hospital. Furthermore, for seventeen years, since the birth of their only child, he had remained separate from his wife. Whenever he was home, he would sleep alone in his own room. He didn't love her; nor did he dislike her. In a way he treated her like a cousin of sorts.

Now his parents had died long ago, and their daughter Hua had graduated from middle school. He felt that the family didn't depend on him anymore and that it was time to move along with his own life. For better or worse, he should disentangle himself from this loveless marriage.

Early the next morning the couple caught a tractor that was going to Wujia Town to fetch an electric motor for the village's new mill-house. Together with them in the trailer sat Shuyu's younger brother Bensheng, the accountant of the production brigade, who had heard about their going to the divorce court. For more than ten years, every summer Bensheng had gone to the courthouse with them, though he had remained silent in the court. From the very beginning, Lin had believed that it was Bensheng who had made Shuyu change her mind at the last moment. Yet the two men, sitting against the panels of the trailer, didn't show any animosity toward each other. Quietly they were smoking Lin's Glory cigarettes.

Wujia Town was eighteen miles west of Goose Village. On both sides of the road many fields had been reaped, bundles of wheat and millet were piled like thousands of tiny graves. Several horse carts were being loaded in a field by the commune members, the tines of their pitchforks glinting in the sun. The tractor passed a meadow, where a dozen milk cows were browsing, a few calves skittering. In the north stretched the Songhua River, broad like a lake; on its sur-

face a brownish steamer was crawling east, leaving behind strips of black smoke. A pair of pelicans were flying beyond the water, bobbing on the horizon.

The tractor jolted along slowly on the rutted road. Halfway through the eighteen miles, Lin began to feel a backache, which he hadn't had in past years. I'm getting old, he said to himself. This case shouldn't drag on forever. I must brace myself for the judge and get it settled this time.

At the entrance to the county town, the road was blocked by a column of horse carts transporting bricks, and the tractor had to follow them at a walking pace. Bensheng and the driver, nicknamed Dragonfly, grew impatient and couldn't help cursing time and again. Not until half an hour later did they reach the town center. It was market day, so the sidewalks of Central Street were occupied by vendors. They were selling poultry, vegetables, fruits, eggs, live fish, piglets, clothes. Everywhere were wicker baskets, chick cages, oil jars, fish basins and pails. A bald man was blowing a brass whistle, a sample of his wares, and the noise split the air and hurt people's ears. Some young girls at watermelon stands were smoking self-rolled cigarettes while crying for customers and waving goose-feather fans to keep flies away.

The tractor driver dropped his passengers at the black brick courthouse, which was at the west end of Central Street, opposite New China Bookstore. Then he drove away to pick up the motor at the repair shop.

Divorces were rare in the county. The court would handle about a dozen cases a year, and only two or three would end in a divorce. Most of the time the court tried to help the couples resolve their marital problems and get them back together.

The judge was a rotund fiftyish man in a police uniform. At the sight of Lin and Shuyu, he made a face and said, "Again?" He shook

his head, then waved at a young policewoman at the back of the courtroom to come to the front and take notes.

After everybody was seated, Lin went across to the judge and handed him the letter of recommendation.

Following the formality, the judge asked him to present his case to the court. Remaining in his seat, Lin said, "There has been no love between us, so we are applying for a divorce. Please don't take me for a heartless man, Comrade Judge. My wife and I have been separated for seventeen years. I've always been good to her and—"

"Let's get this straight first," the judge cut him short. "You said '*we* are applying for a divorce,' but the letter of recommendation only mentions your name. Is your wife applying for a divorce too?"

"No, I'm sorry. I apply for it myself."

The judge was familiar with this case, knowing Lin had been involved with another woman in Muji City, so he didn't bother to question him further. He turned to Shuyu and asked if the husband's statement was true.

She nodded, her "yes" almost inaudible.

"You two have not slept together for seventeen years?" asked the judge.

She shook her head.

"Yes or no?"

"No."

"Would you accept a divorce?"

She didn't answer, her eyes fixed on the wide floorboards, which warped in places. Lin stared at her, thinking, Come on, say yes.

For a minute or so she made no sound. Meanwhile the judge was waiting patiently, waving a large fan, on which a tiger stretched its neck howling with a mouth like a bloody basin. He said to her, "Think hard. Don't rush to a decision."

Her brother raised his hand. The judge allowed him to speak.

Bensheng stood up and said, "Judge Sun, my sister is an illiterate housewife and doesn't know how to express herself clearly, but I know how she feels."

"Tell us then."

"It's unfair for Lin Kong to do this to her. She has lived with the Kongs for more than twenty years, serving them like a dumb beast of burden. She looked after his sick mother until the old woman died. Then his father fell ill, and for three years she took care of the old man so well that he never had a single bedsore. After his father was gone, she raised their daughter alone and worked inside and outside the house like a widow, although her husband was still alive. She has lived a hard life, all the villagers have seen it and say so. But during all these years Lin Kong kept another woman, a mistress, in Muji City. This is unfair. He can't treat a human being, his wife, like an overcoat—once he has worn it out, he dumps it." Bensheng sat down, his face red and puffing out a little. He looked a bit tearful.

His words filled Lin with shame. Lin didn't argue, seeing his wife wipe her tears. He remained silent.

With a wave of his hand, the judge folded up the tiger fan and clapped it against the palm of his other hand. Then he brought his fist down on the desk; dust jumped up, a few yellowish skeins dangling in a ray of sunlight. He pointed at Lin's face and said, "Comrade Lin Kong, you are a revolutionary officer and should be a model for us civilians. What kind of a model have you become? A man who doesn't care for his family and loves the new and loathes the old—fickle in heart and unfaithful in words and deeds. Your wife served your family like a donkey at the millstone. After all these years, the grinding is done, and you want to get rid of her. This is immoral and dishonorable, absolutely intolerable. Tell me, do you have a conscience or not? Do you deserve your green uniform and the red star on your cap?"