

The White Snake

Act I

Cast

Grandfather
Yun
White Snake, Bai Suzhen
Green Snake, Xiao Qing
Liang Xuxian, pharmacist
Liang Suling, his elder sister
Mayor Xia
Fahai, a monk
Servant
Boatman
Mrs. Ma
Mrs. Gao
Townspeople

Prologue

(A bare mountain top. Grandfather and Yun are searching for something. They have been searching all day.)

I'm tired, let's go back. Grandfather

You rest here. I'll just look nearby. Yun

I should never have told you. Grandfather

You had to. It's my story too. Yun

But I never meant for you to go on this wild goose chase. It'll be the death of me. Grandfather

Oh, oh, look! *(she runs off stage and comes back)* Just another white root. They fool me each time. *(goes off)* Yun

Grandfather

Don't go too far. It's getting dark. *(to himself)* Obsessed. I guess I was the same when I first heard of the two snake sisters, one white as cloud and the other green as bamboo....*(afraid, he looks up and calls)* Yun, where are you? Come back now. Yun? Yun!

(crack of thunder, two giant puppet snakes—in the style of Chinese lion dance—dance)

Scene I At the lakeside

Suzhen

These new fingers tingle like lightening rods, but my tongue lolls like a dead lump. My muscles feel as sluggish as if I were coming out of a long sleep.

Qing

A thousand-year brumation! Look what long legs and arms! But we can't slip down a hole or glide up a tree anymore. We're lumbering, clumsy brutes.

Suzhen

I suppose we're delicate....for humans.

Qing

Well, let's go find out what they think of us!

Suzhen

No...it's too dangerous.

Qing

What was the point of meditating so long if we aren't going to take this final test?

Suzhen

You know we only *look* human. When they find out, they'll slit us open and drink our blood.

Qing

If they're so vicious why did we even want to become human?

Suzhen

Now that I am one I forget...

Qing

We wanted to understand the mystery, why they hate us.

Suzhen

(interrupts) You're changing the story. We wanted to be human because it was the highest form of mortal existence.

Qing

I never believed that. I wanted to know the real story. Adam and Eve tell one version, but Fu Xi and Nu Wa tell another. The only way to find out was to become human and go live among them. That town across the lake looks like a good place to start. Let's go. *(she's about to jump in)*

Suzhen

(catches Qing by her clothes) You can't just plunge in.

Qing
Oh, right. Damned inconvenient. What now?

Suzhen
Boatman, we want to cross.

Boatman
This boat's already reserved.

Qing
Take us first and then come back.

Boatman
No!

Qing
Why you...

Suzhen
Qing, stop. We'll find another.

Qing
There isn't another.

Suzhen:
Oh, it's beginning to rain.

Qing
So?

Suzhen
It'll soak our clothes. In another minute, they'll be clinging to our bodies like...like a second skin.

Qing
(to Boatman) Listen, if you take us across now, we'll pay double. If you don't, *(lowers her voice)* I'll squeeze the life out of you.

Suzhen
Please, it's raining so hard your passenger probably won't come.

Boatman
Here he comes now.

Xuxian
(enters) What's wrong?

Boatman

These ladies want to cross.

Xuxian

Tell them to get in. Hurry, the storm is picking up.

Boatman

(to Qing) You'll keep your word and pay me double?

Qing

Row, tortoise.

Xuxian

You have no umbrella? (*he holds his umbrella over Suzhen*).

Suzhen

Thank you.

Xuxian

Take the ladies home first.

Qing

Where do you live, sir?

Xuxian

Not far from the Qian Tang Gate.

Qing

We live near there, too.

Xuxian

Really? (*to Suzhen*) Then you must know my pharmacy. My name is Liang Xuxian.

Qing

I am called Xiao Qing, and my sister is Bai Suzhen.

Suzhen

Thank you for taking us across.

Xuxian

Take the umbrella with you.

Qing

(*Suzhen refuses but Qing takes it*) We'll return it to you tomorrow.

Xuxian

Fine, no actually, I'd better come pick it up. Where did you say...

Qing

We're on the corner of... Yu Sheng Road. (*Qing whispers to Suzhen*) There must be a Yu Sheng road somewhere...

Black out

Scene 2 At Xuxian's pharmacy

Suling

Get up, lazy good for nothing. How many times do I have to tell you, the herbs have to be picked before dawn?

Xuxian

(sneezes) Dawn seems to be getting earlier and darker.

Suling

If you hadn't been out in the rain yesterday, you wouldn't have caught a cold. It's not safe for me to go alone in the dark, and one of us has to mind the shop.

Xuxian

(he snuffles and sneezes with a cold) I know, I know.

Suling

Brother, we have to work even harder now that Chan's son has returned. We're already losing customers to him.

Xuxian

Don't worry. Last night I had a dream about two beautiful goddesses, one in green silk, and the other in white. I'm sure it's a sign of good fortune.

Suling

You and your goddesses! I know what such dreams mean. Go, before Chan's assistants have plucked the mountain bare.

Xuxian

(getting dressed) Don't worry, they don't know where to pick the best herbs, and just mix the good and bad together.

Suling

So they sell cheaper. What can we do but follow?

Xuxian

Not as long as Dr. Ping still recommends us.

Suling

We can't rely on one man's loyalty, even if he is famous. Besides, Ping is getting old and so are his patients. You have to be more enterprising. Go to the city and drum up more business. And we should look for your bride among the doctors' families.

Xuxian

Only if I can choose for myself.

Suling

I'm your father and mother, I raised you.

Xuxian

I'll think about it. First to the mountain.
Black out.

Scene 3 At the Snake Sisters' house

Qing

(playing cards) I'm tired of waiting. Perhaps he isn't as eager as he seemed.

Suzhen

It was so embarrassing, I didn't know which way to look. I'm so used to people shrieking and running away.

Qing

(knocking) Speak of the human!

Xuxian

Hello, I've just come...

Qing

To get your umbrella.

Suzhen

Why, you're soaking! Come in.

Xuxian

I've been up on the mountain picking herbs *(shows his sack)* and the storm caught me by surprise.

Qing

Show us what you've got. My sister and I are quite knowledgeable. *(he spreads them out; they study the herbs; he studies Suzhen)*

Suzhen

Yes, quite good quality, but there are better higher up....I'll go get tea.

Xuxian

I only venture up to the top twice a year. It's too dangerous most of the time. There are landslides, and besides, it's covered in snow.

Qing

But if you know what plants lie beneath and where, they're the best.

Xuxian

But I don't have such powers. *(whispers)* Are neither of you married?

Qing

No. Are you?

Xuxian

Not yet, but just this morning my elder sister was saying I must marry soon.

Qing

And what did you tell her?

Xuxian

That I would make my own choice.

Qing

It seems you already have. It's now up to the other party.

Xuxian

Yes, Little Sister, you've guessed my mind. Please be my go-between and tell your elegant sister how much I love her. As wise as she is beautiful, is she not worthy of being loved? But am I, a poor pharmacist, worthy of her? An unknown man cannot just walk in and expect to be taken at face value.

Qing

Your face is not bad.

Xuxian

Hers is the loveliest I've ever seen. And she moves with some otherworldly grace, I can't quite explain.

Qing

Then it's best not to try.

Suzhen

(enters) Please accept some humble refreshment. So, is your business new or has your family run the pharmacy a long time?

Xuxian

The Liang family has been making medicine for four hundred years, from the time of Li Shih-chen's famous pharmacopoeia, *Pen ts'ao kang mu*, but I'm afraid the business isn't prospering. The new twists and turns of business leave me like a...

Qing

A lobster in a boiling pot?

Xuxian

Not exactly.

Qing

But you are turning red.

Suzhen

Qing, let Mr. Liang speak.

Xuxian

I'm lucky to have the backing of the famous Dr. Ping who once saved the governor's life, but I can't rely on his loyalty and have to find a new strategy.

Qing

What are you going to do?

Xuxian

I don't know. People nowadays are so confused by misleading labels, and medicines 'doctored' with false ingredients. I follow the ancient manuals precisely.

Suzhen

But many discoveries have been made since those manuals were written. Are you averse to new treatments?

Xuxian

Not at all. But I must be persuaded of their efficacy.

Suzhen

How are others prospering?

Xuxian

Our traditional medicine has become a new fad, both at home and abroad. Now with so many people growing rich, they're all clamoring for exotic cures.

Qing

Why? Are rich people more sick than before?

Xuxian

(laughs and shakes his head) The things people get into their heads. When they hear about some fashionable new disease, they suddenly have to have it too. They imitate the wealthy even in sickness. Even pain has status.

Qing

So what do you do?

Xuxian

If I tell them they're not sick, they get angry and don't come back. I have to wear a grave demeanor, carefully measure out some harmless herbs, and repeat the instructions two or three times before they're satisfied.

Suzhen

People just want someone to listen and care.

Xuxian

I care for every person that comes into my shop, sick or not sick. *(he sighs)*

Qing

Now what?

Xuxian

But people have lost all sense of proportion. Rare animal parts are all the rage, and so profitable—bear bile, tiger bone, shark’s fin, rhino horn, snake blood...

Suzhen

(shivers) How barbaric!

Xuxian

They’re all included in our ancient pharmacopoeia, but were used sparingly before. I tell my customers it’s an illegal and cruel trade, but they just don’t believe me. They think that when a rhino’s horn or a shark’s fin is cut off, the animal just grows another, like fingernails or hair. Well, you know how people think.

Qing

We do?

Suzhen

Tell us.

Xuxian

The rarer the animal, the higher the price; the higher the price, the more it’s sought, the more it’s sought, the more it’s killed. The poaching feeds the market, the market encourages more poaching. It’s a vicious circle perpetuated by the pharmacists, my competition.

Qing

(whispers) Truly, our minds are not human.

Xuxian

It’s no longer about health at all! Only status! That’s why I no longer stock animal parts.

Qing

You won’t get rich.

Xuxian

With the growing trade in bogus animal parts and fake Western medicine, I might not be alive either.

Suzhen

Mr. Liang, my sister didn’t mean to offend.

Xuxian

It’s all right. My sister thinks the same. I’d better go. I didn’t mean to bother you with my troubles. *(goes)*

Suzhen

Rarer than the rhino is the man who would endanger his livelihood for...

Qing

For animals?

Suzhen

For his self respect. Oh, he forgot his umbrella.

Qing

He didn't forget. I think we're going to have to save this noble pharmacist from his high-minded self.

Suzhen

He'd be too embarrassed to accept help from us.

Qing

Not if you're his wife. Well, sister, we're not two days into this human experiment. Are you ready to tie your fate to a man's?

Suzhen

It may have been fate that I met him, but not that I have fallen in love.

Black out

Scene 4 In Xuxian's pharmacy

Xuxian

No, Mayor Xia, it will not help you. Now here's prime Korean ginseng. Boiled with ginger, it's an excellent tonic.

Xia

But I want rhino horn. I must please my new wife.

Xuxian

It's very expensive, and it won't help you.

Xia

I have the money

Xuxian

But I have only a little horn left and it's used for fever. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but despite its appearance, rhino horn is not an aphrodisiac.

Xia

A what?

Xuxian

An, uh, aid for men.

Xia

Using foreign words now, are you? I've been coming to this pharmacy since my grandmother first brought me, but if you won't give me what I want, I'll go Chan's. (*exit*)

Suling

(*enter*) What did he want?

Xuxian

Rhino horn. He has a new wife.

Suling

You didn't give it to him? What's wrong with you? He's the mayor, you fool. We can get more.

Xuxian

Not legally.

Suling

Xiao Chan has no problem.

Xuxian

The Chans have no trouble getting anything. They're stockpiling every kind of animal.

Suling

That's just smart business. The price will only go up.

Xuxian

I will not be responsible for the extinction of a noble beast. A rhino used to be a gift only for emperors. Now a billion people want a piece of it!

Suling

Noble beast! You might as well be a vet.

Xuxian

The latest research says for low fevers, it is best just to let the body rest. And for high fevers, Western pills better and cheaper than rhino horn. When horn was all we had, we used it sparingly, now when it's disappearing people think it's the magic cure for everything. I won't support such foolishness.

Suling

People remember their mothers using it, and when they're sick they want their mothers. Xuxian, you're a good man, but you understand neither business nor psychology.

Xuxian

I'm sure the mayor's mother didn't get it for what he wanted.

Suling

That's not your concern. You're arguing yourself out of a profession.

Xuxian

Don't you see, it's all this quackery that's killing it? If I join in, I might get rich, but I destroy the credibility of thousands of years of carefully gathered information.

Suling

People can no longer tell the difference.

Xuxian

Listen, there's a rumor that rhino horn cures cancer. And when the last rhino is gone, imposters like Xiao Chan will start making fakes, if he hasn't already.

Suling

So everyone else will get rich on the rumor while we dig our graves with the truth. Brother, at a certain point integrity is just stubborn pride.

Xuxian

(he looks up and sees himself in mirror) I have the reputation of this family to uphold. I will not betray my own knowledge.

Suling

I know you think I'm old fashioned and small minded...

Xuxian

No, no....

Suling

And only think about profit, but it's not true. I too, care about our family name and the success of our shop. Can't you see we have to change with the times?

Xuxian

I think about it day and night. What do you suggest? I sell Western pills?

Suling

Yes, why not?

Xuxian

I'd have to re-register. I'm afraid if I change over, we'll lose our old customers with no guarantee of attracting new ones. They'll accuse me of chasing profit whatever change I make.

Suling

Accuse *you*, when no one else is doing anything but? Go with Dr. Ping the next time he goes to the city. Learn the current practices...and find a wife.

Xuxian

You're right. I need to know how others are dealing with this dilemma. They can't all be like Chan.

Black out.

Scene 5 Snake Sisters' house

Qing

(Xuxian knocks on their door) Well, neighbor, good to see you.

Xuxian

Is your sister at home? I'd like to speak to her.

Suzhen

(enters) Oh, Mr. Liang, I thought I heard your voice. Do sit down.

Xuxian

Sorry for the intrusion, but I am planning a trip to city and...

Suzhen

To the city!

Xuxian

You seemed to think I was too oldfashioned.

Suzhen

Oh, I hope you didn't think...

Xuxian

You were right. I didn't know what direction to take and so, did nothing. Your words have spurred me on. And since I'm planning a long journey, I wish to discuss....

Qing

(interrupts) You've come to ask about whether crushed pearl is good for dizziness at high altitudes?

Xuxian

No, not exactly, but I'll be glad to hear your opinion on it...another time...

Qing

Or whether ginger root is good for blistered feet?

Xuxian

Also very interesting, but at the moment, I...

Qing

Or why these sesame cakes made by my sister are such a good stimulant that I can hear your heart pounding?

Xuxian

You are a fountain of useful information, but *(realizes)* oh, ah, yes, they are delicious.

Suzhen

(to Qing) Hush! How can you be so vulgar?

Xuxian

Suzhen, I want to marry you very much, but only if I get the vulgar little sister thrown in to the bargain.

Qing

What! As your concubine?

Xuxian

(laughing) No, no, as my....little sister.

Qing

Aye, what a businessman! What do you think, Suzhen? Can you love such a man?

Xuxian

I've told you of the challenges I face, but with you at my side I know I can overcome them. Ever since we met, I've thought of you as my savior goddess, no, not goddess exactly, but somehow, my destiny. I wonder if you feel the same about me. Aren't we meant to be together?

Suzhen

Yes, I feel that way, too. Perhaps in an earlier life, we met, fell in love, and...

Qing

And?

Suzhen

I don't know. I guess it's just a matter of faith.

Xuxian

In me?

Suzhen

Uh, well, yes, but I meant...in myself.

Xuxian

Then you will marry me?

Suzhen

You don't know who you are marrying.

Qing

(aside) I'll say!

Xuxian

As you say, it's a matter of faith.

Suzhen

Yes, and without it, we die.

Qing

So, now all you have to do is persuade *your* sister.

Xuxian

I'll take care of that. I want you to be properly accommodated in my house before I leave for the city. Prepare yourselves. In three days, I'll come to take you home.

Black out

Scene 6 At Xuxian's pharmacy

Suling

How dare you! I won't let you marry an uncivilized woman from the mountains. You think she knows herbs? Better than us, the son and daughter of the famous Liangs? Have you lost your mind?

Xuxian

I've told you Suzhen is elegant and soft spoken, willing to serve you as a dutiful sister-in-law. Curb your anger at my not consulting you. You'll see I've made my decision to help our family.

Suling

I won't look at her or speak to her.

Xuxian

You'll treat her courteously, and if you have any complaints, direct them to me. I'm going to get her and her sister now. *(leaves)*

Suling

(shouts after him) Sister? You never told me about any sister! *(mutters to herself)*
A house of three women and one foolish boy! Nothing could be worse. He's smitten, but I'm sure she's tricked him. Chan's son has been looking at me with a certain gleam in his eye. If Xuxian's mountain fairy gets any ideas about taking over the shop, at least Xiao Chan offers me another chance. Aye, what is a woman? I spend my life raising the no-good boy and now he marries a no-good woman.

Xuxian

Sister, meet Bai Suzhen and her sister, Xiao Qing. *(they kneel and bow to her)* They bring gifts of silk, cash, and rare herbs.

Suzhen

Dear Sister, thank you for welcoming us into your house. We'll serve you to the best of our poor ability.

Qing

Dear Sister, we'll assist you in any way possible.

Suling

(softened by their humility) Well Brother, go to the market to buy something for the wedding dinner.

Suzhen

We've brought cooked food with us. Please let us prepare the meal.

Suling

Very well. *(they prepare the food and sit down to eat)* What's this? Duck? It smells very good. And this? Ah, the fish looks done to perfection.

Xuxian

(whispers) My sister loves a good meal.

Suzhen

(smiles) Who doesn't?

Suling

These dishes are unusual. You used medicinal herbs to flavor them, but I've never tasted these combinations before. I must say, they're quite delicious. Perhaps, we should open a restaurant.

Suzhen

I'd like to start an herb garden in back.

Xuxian

Good idea. We can use them both fresh and dried in winter. It will cut down on costs.

Suling

I always said we should have an herb garden, but I couldn't do everything myself.

Qing

And I'm happy to help gather herbs on the mountain.

Xuxian

You see, Sister. You won't have to go yourself. You can stay in the shop and make prescriptions.

Suling

She'll have to learn what to pick first. I might not be a cook, but I'm the daughter of Liang and know how to make the best medicine. Now, once you get to the city, try to drum up business among the wealthy merchants. Forget the scholars. These days the merchants are richer, more superstitious, and suffer from more illnesses.

Xuxian

We shouldn't take advantage of sufferers' credulity.

Suling

We should take every advantage! People today are willing to try anything to fight cancer.

Xuxian

Anything but clean up the air and water. When they get sick, they'll spend a fortune on miracle cures. But when they're healthy, they can't be bothered to do the cleanup. *That's* too expensive.

Suling

If only you could discover some new disease....

Xuxian

I won't start making up fake diseases or raising false hopes.

Suzhen

But there's nothing wrong with doing a little experimentation.

Suling

My meaning exactly. (*sighs*) You just don't know how to keep up with the times.

Xuxian

In these times of constant change, people appreciate stability and reliability. And now that I'm a married man, that reputation is even more important to maintain.

Act II

Scene 1 On the Mountain near Fahai's hermitage

Suling

(chipping away at a rock) There, that's enough. Always chip on this side that gets the first morning sun. And don't go over there, ever. It's Fahai's hermitage.

Qing

Ah?

Suling

Our holy man, the only person everyone respects. Make sure you never disturb him. Watch out, there's an excellent fungus right by your foot.

Qing

My foot? Oh, yes. He never comes down off the mountain?

Suling

Only twice a year. With Fahai up here chanting sutras from morning till night, and praying for all sentient beings, we're safe. That leaf's got yellow edges. Well, you're certainly faster than Xuxian. He dawdles over everything. I thought he'd never leave. Come, we have enough now.

Qing

He wasn't eager to go.

Suling

Quite! So in love in with your sister he was even more absent-minded. Not even getting out of bed till noon.

Qing

They were both happy.

Suling

Too happy, and with less sense than ever. Now he won't have much time in the city before the rainy season starts. Then the roads will be impassible. *(they enter shop)*

Scene Two At Xuxian's pharmacy

Suzhen

Good morning, give me the herbs. I'll dry them out while you eat.

Suling

Hello Mrs. Ma, have you eaten?

Ma

Where's your brother?

Suling

He's gone with Dr. Ping to the city to learn about all the latest diseases.

Ma

Well, I hope they don't bring any back.

Suling

(laughing) Excellent joke, Mrs. Ma!

Ma

Who's going to look after us if they're both gone?

Suling

No need to worry. I'm as well-versed as my brother. Now, how can I help you?

Ma

My son caught a fever yesterday and it hasn't gone down. He cries out saying his joints are on fire.

Suling

Oh dear! It's too early for dengue. Any rash?

Ma

No. Sometimes I think he just gets sick to stay in bed and have me wait on him. But what can I do?

Suling

You're right. It's best not to take chances. I'll make this *Yin Qiao San Jia Jian* for you.

Ma

I need to get him well quickly and back to work.

Suling

Make sure you boil it the full four hours and that he drinks it all.

Ma

Even he knows the worse it tastes the better it works.

Suling

If his temperature doesn't drop by this evening, come again.

Ma

I'm sure that won't be necessary, if I threaten him with more medicine.

Suling

(laughs) Ah, your sense of humor never gets sick! *(exit in)*

Suzhen

(coming out, calling) Mrs. Ma, four hours is a long time to be with fever. Soak these mustard leaves in vinegar and crush them into a poultice to put on his forehead and chest. They should cool and comfort him till the medicine is ready.

Ma

I don't have any more money.

Suzhen

My gift.

Ma

Then, thank you. *(goes out. Qing enters.)*

Suzhen

I'm glad our initiation into the household has gone so smoothly. I was worried Xuxian's sister would cause trouble after he left. She's easily tamed with a good meal.

Qing

I don't trust her. When I go with her to collect herbs, she criticizes me the whole time.

Suzhen

Be careful! Don't make her nervous.

Qing

I can only feign stupidity so far.

Suzhen

Qing, be patient. It's hard for her to adjust to new people coming into her home.

Qing

It's not fair! You've been curled up with your lover and I have to deal with the shrew. I don't like being stuck here as a servant—this is not what we, what I, meditated a thousand years for. You've got what you wanted, but I still need to search. I want adventure, not this captivity.

Suzhen

I know. Keep your eyes open, but keep them lowered. We have to be circumspect and endure. Qing, I'm pregnant.

Qing

Already? You really have adjusted to this life! You don't seem very nervous.

Suzhen

Of course, I am. As all first time mothers are.

Qing

Hasn't it occurred to you that you might give birth to a snake...or worse?

Suzhen

No, I have faith in dominant genes—two legs, two arms, black hair, dark eyes, and ...

Qing

A fat tongue. (*shudders*) But don't worry. I'll look after you though I long to stay on the mountain.

Suzhen

You're free to roam as you like, but don't stay after dark or Sister-in-law will suspect you're seeing a man!

(*Black out*)

Scene 3 At Fahai's hermitage

Fahai

(*looks up, startled from his meditation*) What are you doing here?

Qing

Oh, I'm sorry. I'm picking herbs and didn't mean to disturb you, but I was so distracted....

Fahai

Why?

Qing

So many strange animals that don't belong here. They're frightened and confused. Rabbits with some of their fur shaved as if they had just escaped from a laboratory, sparrows with clipped wings; carp by the dozens, and red-eared slider turtles from America and carp filling the streams.

Fahai

They've been released by devotees for Vesak.

Qing

Ah, yes, The Buddha's birthday.

Fahai

The best time for earning merit.

Qing

Yes, but surely not the best way. Most of these creatures will starve, and those that survive will be a danger to the native inhabitants. I've heard you protect the mountain—you could persuade people not to do this.

Fahai

Do not presume to tell me my responsibilities. People need a way to demonstrate charity and compassion.

Qing

Acts of charity and compassion should be informed and thoughtful.

Fahai

Do not presume to teach me the sutras. Many people make their living by selling the animals for release.

Qing

Yes, a profitable business. But hardly merciful. The Buddha would not be pleased.

Fahai

Do not presume to understand The Buddha's mind.

Qing

No, I won't. I will quietly let him know mine. (*goes*)

Fahai

She disappears into the forest, no ordinary woman, but a spirit of the place. Why does she show up now? Twenty years I've lived on the mountain, my soul at peace, my strength and wisdom freely shared with others. Now suddenly, my long-cultivated detachment seems as thin as...cast-off snake skin. She's gone, but she still captures my heart. (*he sits in 'earth-touching' mudra, closes his eyes*)

If she were a true guide, her face would not cloud my inner vision. She justly rebuked me, but if I speak out now against the release, she'll imagine it's due to her influence. I will not be so ensnared. In this case, right action is 'no action'; the ideal form is 'no form.' Ordinary people need forms. Only the highest beings know how to show charity and compassion in secret and without self-congratulation.

Scene 4 In Xuxian's pharmacy

Chan

(*enters*) Good morning, Miss Liang!

Suling

Xiao Chan! To what do I owe this unusual honor? Have you run out of an ingredient and come to pay an exorbitant price for some of ours?

Chan

(*laughs*) No, but if that ever happened, here is exactly where I'd come....Everything looks the same.

Suling

Why, of course.

Chan

I expected some change. (*sniffs*) Smells good. I keep hearing stories about how wonderful your cures are, and curiosity got the better of me. Your brother is still in the city?

Suling

Oh yes, I'm not sure when to expect him back.

Chan

Then you're the better physician. You've magically cured Mr. Chao of his gout. Mrs. Fu's arthritis that always acts up this time of year has disappeared, and old mother Ma goes about with a smile on her face boasting of her son's vigor. You certainly know how to make your

customers happy. I don't see any dried sharks' fin or birds' nest on your shelves. Your jars of cicada husks and seahorses are almost empty too. A pretty woman's smile works more wonders than I imagined.

Suling

What a charming thing to say, Xiao Chan; but you know I'm older than you and should be shown more respect.

Chan

Only by a year. I spent five years studying in the city and I return to find you unchanged. I suspect you've discovered the Elixir of Eternal Youth and are manufacturing it in the back of your shop.

Suling

Ah, if only that were true. I'm afraid the long hours of plucking herbs in raw weather have aged me quickly.

Chan

Not at all. Your cheeks are plump and your eyes bright. You're the best advertisement for your shop.

Suling

Now you're getting carried away. Have you come for any other reason than to make me blush?

Chan

Yes, I want to take advantage of your brother's absence to talk to you privately.

Suling

I see. Then please sit down. *(she pours tea)*

Chan

Your family has been established here for hundreds of years, and mine, though newer to this area, has an equally long and honorable pedigree. We have been in unfriendly competition recently.

Suling

Ever since you came back with so many new ideas, you've sparked everyone's desire to be up-to-date.

Chan

That's right, in part. Xuxian is now off trying to do the same. But many of my ideas I haven't been able to implement. As my father grows older; he's increasingly stubborn and just doesn't understand the new ways of doing business.

Suling

My brother suffers the same disease.

Chan

Well, that's why I've come. You and I think alike....and are unmarried. As it is, people are confused and...

Suling

I don't quite understand...

Chan

I think you do. If we marry and merge our businesses, we can capture the entire market. We'd have the capital not only to expand our inventory, but also to invest in new products. You and I are alike...we think of the future. We're foolish to be working so hard and scraping by with so little when the opportunities to expand are so good.

Suling

(sighs) How many nights I've lain awake thinking the same. I've tried to persuade Xuxian.

Chan

If when he comes back and still won't listen to reason, then you and I...

Suling

You and I...*(hears rustling in the back and pulls away)*

Suzhen

(comes in with snacks) I heard the tea cups rattle and assumed a guest had come. Mr. Chan, what a pleasure to see you. Everything fine with your family?

Chan

We are all well. And yourself? It must be difficult to have your husband away so soon after your marriage.

Suzhen

Of course I miss him. But we're kept busy. Please try some freshly baked cakes.

Chan

Delicious, thank you. Now I must go. If there's any way I can assist you in his absence, please do not hesitate to call. Good day. *(exits)*

Suzhen

That was very decent of him.

Suling

No, I don't trust him. He offered the help of his assistants. I certainly don't want them finding out where and what we collect. Your sister needs to watch out.

Suzhen

Qing knows where those boys are long before they have any idea of her presence.

Suling

I've noticed that. It's quite uncanny. And strangely, though she seems oblivious of her feet, she never stumbles. Several times she's saved me from slipping.

Suzhen

I'm glad she's been of service.

Suling

I'd be happy if Xuxian did not know about this visit right away. It would give me a little time to find out what Xiao Chan is really up to. He laughed when he saw that Xuxian won't sell any more animal parts, not even seahorses.

Suzhen

I'm glad he doesn't after he told me they're disappearing. They're devoted to their mates; if one dies, the other won't mate again. I think poems should be written about seahorse fidelity.

Suling

Men like to eat them for virility, and you can never stock enough for that.

Suzhen

(puzzled) But it's the male that carries the eggs.

Suling

What? The males get pregnant? *(they laugh)* That's probably what men really want. They hate having to rely on us for sons. Did Xuxian tell you why he wouldn't buy deer antler? Boiled with ginseng, it's an excellent tonic.

Suzhen

He says the antlers are cut when the blood still supplies the velvet and the nerves are attached.

Suling

Of course, that's what makes them such a good heart stimulant.

Suzhen

The animals run in circles, crazed with pain.

Suling

Ah, my soft-hearted soft-brained brother. Next, he'll be saying we can't eat pork because the pig protests. *(exit)*

Qing

(enters) Suzhen, look what I've found.

Suzhen

What is it?

Qing

Don't you recognize it? A pangolin, sweet shy little anteater. I rescued it from a trap. Poachers are setting them all over the mountain.

Suzhen

But why?

Qing

That rogue Chan is buying them up as fast as he can, selling the scales as ‘good for the heart.’ A little sympathy would be better for peoples’ hearts. Oh, the more I learn about humans, the more I respect snakes.

Suzhen

What are you going to do with it?

Qing

Keep it in the herb garden—it eats only ants and you were complaining they crawl all over your plants. Don’t tell Sister-in-law. She’ll want you to cook it up.

(Black out)

Scene 5 In Xuxian’s pharmacy

Suling

(holding letter) This is just like him. I told Xuxian to get back before the rainy season and now he’s delayed so long he’ll have to wait till after the Ghost month. Stupid boy! And he must have forgotten that next Tuesday is Mulian’s festival when we make a special offering for our mother.

Suzhen

I’m sure he’s not forgotten. Something important must have detained him.

Suling

If you had told him you were pregnant he would have returned fast enough.

Suzhen

I thought it best not to distract him from business.

Suling

Business! The word isn’t in his vocabulary. Our father was just like him, the beloved doctor treating people for free. If it hadn’t been for our mother’s careful management, we would have starved. He got all the acclaim and she was ridiculed for her penny-pinching.

Suzhen

Xuxian knows he’d be lost without you. Tell me what we must prepare for the festival.

Suling

First we must help sweep and cleanse the Tu Di Gong and Tu Di Po temples. And then bring them cooked offerings. The next day, do the same at the Buddhist Guanghua temple.

Suzhen

And offerings outside the house?

Suling

Of course. I’ll burn the paper money. I also invite the monks to chant the *Yu lan ban* at the family shrine. People have heard me boast of your cooking, and now everyone expects it to be excellent.

Suzhen

I’ll get started.

Suling

And you must prepare something special for Fahai. This is one of the only times he comes down from the mountain. His support is indispensable. When one of our customers has the inconsiderateness to die, Fahai prays for the soul to migrate peacefully and removes any guilt from us. You must make a good impression on him. And perhaps, it's best to keep your sister out of sight. Her sharp tongue might offend him.

Suzhen

I'll send her up the mountain; she prefers to be there anyway.

Suling

But make sure she's back before dark. She'd be great temptation for a hungry ghost. (*goes*)

Qing

(*enters*) The town is buzzing. What's going on?

Suzhen

Ghost Month and preparation for Mulian's festival.

Qing

Ah, I've seen those ugly Hungry Ghosts hovering around. Long skinny necks and bulging bellies they look like.....like a snake that's just eaten a rat. (*giggles*) Contented snake, hungry human—even in happiness we're opposites. But why are they showing up now?

Suzhen

Remember Mulian had to rescue his mother from Hell after she kept the money he had given her to donate to the monks. Because of her greed, he had to make food offerings to appease her Hungry Ghost and then persuade The Buddha to allow her a human rebirth. Greedy mother, dutiful son.

Qing

More like greedy monks! I bet Sister-in-law is making a fat red envelope so she can be avaricious the rest of the year.

Suzhen

Shush! She's right to worry about you not controlling your tongue when Fahai comes.

Qing

Oh, so he's deigning to visit us too?

Suzhen

Be good, do you hear!

Qing

Even better, I'll be absent. Oh, this house, this town, these people...

Suzhen

I know you want to leave, but I can't go anywhere now.

Qing

I'll be at the Nu Wa shrine on top of the mountain. Nobody goes up there anymore.

Suzhen

After the baby is born, we can discuss moving with Xuxian, but I warn you, whatever it is you don't like about this place, you're bound to find the same elsewhere.

Qing

When people are poor, desperation excuses their actions; when they're rich, their greed requires no justification. They think we snakes are cruel because we seize our prey, crush it to death, and eat it whole. But they set up ceremonies to hide their cruelty from themselves. You can have your Buddhists and Taoists. Nothing but hypocrisy! I don't want their offerings or their devotion. *(exit)*

Suzhen

(goes to family altar and lights incense) Merciful Kwan Yin, protect my husband from all harm. Lord Buddha, comfort me. My head is throbbing from all the drums, cymbals and firecrackers. Revered mother and father of Xuxian, you know I have honored you every day; deem me worthy of carrying on your lineage. In all ways, I will serve you till the end of my humble life.

Black out

Scene 6 In Xuxian's pharmacy

Suling

(Suzhen is chopping vegetables) Do you want to come with me to the temple? Yesterday, the monks ate up your offerings before even touching the others.

Suzhen

No, I'll stay here.

Suling

All right. Fahai should be coming soon. *(looks out)* Amitofo!

Suzhen

What?

Suling

He's coming already!

Suzhen

Calm yourself. Everything is ready. *(Fahai enters with monks, women bow)*

Suling

Thank you, holy one, for once again bestowing your blessings. Though we only heal the rude body while you liberate the soul, we both devote ourselves to ease the suffering in this life.

Fahai

I know your honorable brother is the best pharmacist in town, but this year reports of his cures have been.... astonishing.

Suling

You're too generous.

Fahai

Where is he? Why isn't he here to greet me?

Suling

My foolish brother set off for the city with Dr. Ping. He promised to be back before today. Please forgive him.

Fahai

Of course. I'll miss our conversation and game of chess, but I'll chant an extra prayer for his safe return. (*Suzhen looks up in thanks, he stares at her*) Who is this woman?

Suling

My foolish brother's wife. I was against the marriage, but she has proved useful in the kitchen and assists me very ably. I am grateful for her help.

Fahai

Woman, where are you from?

Suzhen

(*trembling*) The other side of the lake.

Suling

She's from a pharmacist family and well versed in herbs.

Fahai

Ah, now I understand. I advise you to keep to the time-tested medicines and not experiment with new and eccentric remedies. People might be happy when such cures succeed, but if they go awry, their suspicions and anger will know no bounds.

Suling

I have often said the same thing, but my foolish brother is always eager to keep up with new fashions.

(*Fahai begins his prayer; when he finishes, Suling gives him a red envelope*)

Suling

Although your meditations keep you from all want, we offer this small present.

Suzhen

(*offering food*) Please take some refreshment before you go.

Fahai

(*ignores her*) Tell your brother that I look forward to hearing about his travels the next time I come. Perhaps it will be sooner than we expect.

Suling

You're welcome anytime. He'll be sorry to have missed you. (*Fahai goes*) Well, that didn't go too badly! I'm starving. You look pale.

Suzhen

I'm a bit dizzy.

Suling

Well, lie down. We can both rest now. (*exit*)

Suzhen

(*alone*) Oh Xuxian! Why weren't you here to protect me? That monk looked right through me. Oh, he knows! He knows! What's going to happen now? Wait! Perhaps it was good you weren't here and he couldn't say anything to you. Perhaps he won't come down again until after the child is born. Then I'd feel safe. He could say nothing if you're holding your own son in your arms. But what were his last words—warning me that he might come down sooner? Xuxian, hurry back. Tell me you love me whatever happens.

Black out

Scene 7 At Xuxian's pharmacy. All sitting around the dining table.

Xuxian

(*laughing*) I walked so fast Dr. Ping could barely keep up with me, but the journey seemed endless.

Suling

The city! Tell us about the city.

Xuxian

Nothing but bustling crowds everywhere, so many people coming from the countryside looking for work. Rich people living in high rises so they don't have to confront the desperate masses below.

Suling

No more of that talk. It'll only get you into trouble. Tell us about the medicines. What diseases? What cures?

Xuxian

Not much new in diseases; cancer is the big one everyone talks about, and AIDS, the big one no one does.

Suling

We're lucky not to have that ugly business here.

Xuxian

(*knowing they do*) Ah, yes. Well, aside from having trouble breathing the polluted air, the old people are in pretty good shape; it's the young people that have me worried.

Suzhen

Why? All the little princes and princesses have got the best of everything.

Xuxian

Quite. Spoiled all their lives, they're riddled with discontent. They think they're not smart enough, rich enough, tall enough, white enough, big-eyed enough. Plastic surgery is the booming business.

Suling

Not much call for that here. Remember Granny Su who wanted to look young and dyed her hair black. When her grandson saw her, he cried and wouldn't let her hold him. She had to wait till the white hair grew back before he accepted her! (*laughter*)

Qing

But women have always altered their appearance to please men; it's nothing new.

Xuxian

It's new that men are doing it too, since there are so many more of them.

Suzhen

Girls often don't really care how a boy looks.

Xuxian

It's the employers he has to impress....so that he can get the job to make the money to get the girl.

Qing

So, what impresses them?

Xuxian

Tall men. The most tragic story I heard was of a young man so desperate, he had an operation to break his legs and insert a two-inch segment into the bone.

Suling

Not so tragic if he gets a good job.

Qing

And as long as he never wants to walk again. Vertical is not always beautiful.

Suling

Huh? So no exciting new diseases?

Xuxian

No, only diabetes, heart failure, liver failure, hepatitis. Too much eating, too much drinking, too much smoking, too much stress, too little exercise. In our town, we're a much healthier lot and I credit the good mountain air, fresh herbs and our diagnoses.

Suling

If we're that good, we only put ourselves out of business.

Xuxian

True in theory, but, fortunately for us, not in practice. Now, the reason why I'm so late is that Dr. Ping and I arranged to export some of our mountain herbs under a new label. A premium quality brand that will be strictly limited to a few doctors in the city and then abroad.

Suling

Oh Brother! Finally you've done something smart.

Xuxian

Here are the boxes and bottles. What do you think of the design?

Suzhen

They're beautiful. Look Qing, it's our mountain!

Xuxian

(aside to Suling) I don't want Suzhen to work so much.

Suling

I'll call in the midwife to make the pregnancy food.

Xuxian

That won't be necessary. Suzhen still wants to cook and she knows what she needs.

Suling

Well, I'm glad the next generation is on the way. That's how it should be. *(she looks downcast)*

Xuxian

I know it's hard for you.

Suling

Don't worry, I'll take good care of her. *(to Suzhen)* Don't rub your stomach, it makes for a spoiled child. Let me look. It's a little bit pointed, but still too early to tell. No meat for you till after its born.

Xuxian

What are you talking about?

Suling

Do you forget? Tofu, mushrooms, carrots and lettuce for a male child; pickles, meat and fish for a female.

Xuxian

Superstitious rubbish! Poor peasants had so little meat they had to hope the lack of it would give them a male heir. Our job is to make sure the mother is healthy and comfortable. Let her body do the rest.

Suzhen

Don't quarrel you two. Right now no food appeals.

Xuxian

Then you'll be ravenous later.

Qing

(quietly) That sounds familiar.
Black out

Scene 8 In Chan's pharmacy, a farce with shadow puppets

Xiao Chan

Mr. Fu, still having trouble reading? Even with more light? Yes, keep up the eye exercises but they won't help much. I'll give you the best medicine there is. How do I know? Listen, what animal has the best eyesight in the dark? Right, owls. Luckily, I've just purchased this rare barred owl. You boil it with these herbs, eat the flesh and drink the broth. Keep the feathers, too. Feel those soft inner feathers. They allow the owl to fly without making a sound. Rubbing them on the skin will make it soft and supple. A special gift for you daughter-in-law.

Ah, Little Gao, that's an ugly boil on your back. Too much carrying, you say? Here is a patch of tapir skin to place on it. Tapir, yes that big fat animal from the South. Its fat and skin is very effective. Come back in three days, and I'll put on a new patch.

All right, you two boys; you've waited till everyone else is gone so I can guess what you're after. But you're too young for that sort of thing. What! Stimulant *and* protection? Here's something effective and cheap. No, I'm not insulting you, I used dog penis myself when I was in the army. What? You want sea cucumber? It's very expensive. And wasted on such strong boys. Well, if you have the money. You're sure to have a good time.

Mr. Lee, you're looking very hearty. How old are you now? Ninety-three, and still going strong. Tell these good people your secret. Every week a bowl of turtle's blood? You are the living proof of our medicines efficacy—our best advertisement.

Well snake is good...no, not just for sex, but as a general tonic. What? Xuxian counsels only ginseng and herbs, but snake bile, snake blood, snake pickled in wine are all known for their invigorating properties... *(end of puppet show)*

Suling

(eavesdropping at Chan's house—watching the puppets—is surprised to see Qing) I'm just taking a short cut from the market.

Qing

Is Young Chan is experimenting with new recipes? Anything that we might find useful?

Suling

He was just recommending snake liquor.

Qing

I guess snakes have an obvious appeal for some problems....

Suling

Oh, they're very important, and not just for men. Since they shed the old skin for a clean beautiful new one, the skin is very good for all kinds of skin ailments, just like cicada husks.

Qing

I see. If I ate the skin, would it give me a good complexion?

Suling

You certainly don't need it. Your skin is perfect. Do you have any secret?

Qing

Sleep. Lots of sleep.

Suling

Well, come along, Sleeping Beauty, enough of your foolishness.

Act III

Scene 1 At Xuxian's pharmacy

Xuxian

It's good to see the color back in your cheeks. You were so pale, you frightened me.

Suzhen

Qing and your sister are not the best cooks..

Xuxian

The red-egg-and-ginger party was a great success. You smiled yesterday for the first time since the night I returned.

Suzhen

So many things could have...happened. I even worried that my worry might...

Xuxian

I was scared too. The first month is the most precarious. I knew that if anything did happen, I'd have so little power to help you. But now we've celebrated the boy's first month and he's the healthiest baby I've ever seen. We can relax and be happy.

Suzhen

I am, but you spent an awful lot of money on the celebration. Our business has not been that good.

Xuxian

Our new business is doing very well! The products are selling in the city, and they've passed inspection for export. Last week, our first shipment sold out and orders are pouring in.

Suzhen

You sly fellow! Keeping this all secret from me.

Xuxian

No regrets that you married this shy clumsy boy?

Suzhen

I only hope our son has the same endearing qualities. By the way, where is he?

Xuxian

With my sister. I can't believe how maternal she's become. She seems to have forgotten her own unhappiness. I never told you she was engaged when our parents were still alive, and the boy died in an accident. Everyone took it as an ill omen and no family ever dared to make her another offer. After our parents died, she devoted herself to raising me, but I guess her hopes never died.

Suzhen

I'm glad the child soothes her. She's been so kind and helpful.

Xuxian

The only one who still seems restless is Qing. I hardly see her anymore. We should be looking for a husband for her.

Suzhen

Uh, no. I don't think she's eager to be married yet.

Xuxian

But she's pretty and might get into trouble if we don't find a suitable boy.

Suzhen

She can take care of herself. Besides we need her help.

Xuxian

True. *(Ma enters shop)* Good morning, Mrs. Ma, what is...?

Ma

Come quickly. My boy has been vomiting for two days.

Xuxian

Why didn't you come earlier?

Ma

He complains so much I usually wait to see if it's serious, but this time was different. He tried to hide it from me. He's scared.

Xuxian

Scared of my medicines no doubt. Any other symptoms?

Ma

He coughs, has trouble breathing.

Xuxian

(calls out) Suling! *(Suling enters and he whispers)* I'm going to go see him, but I'm sure I'll be back soon. *(leaves)*

Suzhen

Here comes Mayor Xia. He looks worried, too. (*Xia enters*)

Suling

Mayor Xia, I hope your family is....

Xia

My father is unwell. Where is Xuxian?

Suling

He just went to Mrs. Ma house. We're entering the cold season now. You have to keep the elderly warm and comfortable. They feel the cold more.

Xia

I've already given him 'fragrant meat' broth. He's wheezing...like this.

Suling

Have you consulted Dr. Ping?

Xia

He says it might be pneumonia. Here's the prescription.

Suling

Ah, then I can prepare it for you. (*whispers*) Suzhen, is there anything extra I should add?

Suzhen

Well, perhaps a little dryopteris (*guanzhong*) and a gram of Isatis leaf (*daqingye*).

Suling

There you go. Keep the old man warm and comfortable.

Suzhen

Make sure those taking care of him wash their hands frequently....soap and warm water.

Xia

Yes, yes, all right. But do you have any shark's fin? It's still good medicine. No? Then I'll have to go to Chan's. (*exit*)

Suling

We've treated his family for so long and now he has no loyalty.

Suzhen

Shark's fin will do no good for pneumonia.

Suling

Good morning, Mrs. Gao. We're having quite a busy morning.

Gao

My father isn't well. Two days ago he was over at Mayor Xia's house playing cards with Old Xia, and now both old men are ill.

Suling

They're both heavy smokers.

Gao

My father smokes for health, but he doesn't feel like it now. He's short of breath. And has a high fever.

Suling

Fever? The cold months are cruel to the elderly. If only they could migrate like birds.

Suzhen

Or sleep through winter like.....bears.

Suling

There you go, Mrs. Gao, for the fever.

Gao

I don't know what he'd do if *I* got ill. I'm the only one who has the patience to look after the old grouch. (*exits*)

Black out

Scene 2 At Xuxian's pharmacy

Suzhen

(*Xuxian enters*) You look exhausted....again.

Xuxian

I know.

Suzhen

What's going on?

Xuxian

I don't know.

Suling

This week we're even busier than last.

Xuxian

Suzhen, I don't want you in the shop anymore. Stay in back with the baby. Don't have any contact with the rest of us, and especially with anyone from outside.

Suling

Surely Brother, you're being extreme.

Xuxian

No, something's wrong. Something new. I've been reporting the situation to Mayor Xia every day, telling him how more and more households have sick members. But today, he doesn't

listen. 'Just a seasonal indisposition,' he says and dismisses me. Then I find out he's making his annual report to the county. It can't show that anything is amiss or he'll lose his job.

Suzhen

But Dr. Ping is diagnosing pneumonia. That's serious for older people.

Xuxian

So treat the elderly with the regular prescription for pneumonia, but say nothing about the younger patients that show the same symptoms.

Suling

Everyone will find out sooner or later.

Xuxian

But not how sick they really are. I've never seen anything like it. I have to consult with Dr. Ping again. Oh no, Mayor Xia's servant running over. I hope the old man isn't worse.

Servant

Come, Old Xia's nurse has died.

Suling

Then fetch the coroner.

Xuxian

Wait! How did it happen?

Servant

She started coughing and got a fever, just like Old Xia. She told the mayor she shouldn't keep looking after him, but he insisted since no one else would do it. Then she just stopped breathing. Now no one will go into the old man's room.

Xuxian

You go ahead and tell Mayor Xia I'll be right there. And don't tell anyone what's happened. Do you understand? No one!

Suling

Brother, don't go.

Xuxian

We've got to get this under control; people are beginning to panic.

Suling

It's too dangerous. If you get sick...

Xuxian

If I get sick, I won't come back here and infect you.

Suzhen

How will we be able to take care of you?

Xuxian

You won't. No one must get near the baby but you, Suzhen, and you must stay away from the rest of us. This new disease is too contagious. If people come who are still healthy, recommend *banlan* root to strengthen the immune system. And give them gauze. (*goes*)

Suling

Give?

Suzhen

I'll sew it into masks and then you can sell them. (*Qing enters*)

Suling

Good idea. Qing, take over the shop for awhile.

Qing

Where are you going?

Suling

To find out what others are doing. (*goes*)

Suzhen

Oh dear, what's she up to now?

Qing

You don't know? She's been carrying on with Old Chan's son.

Suzhen

(*laughs*) Ah, that's why she's been looking so content. I thought she was just happy because of the baby. Clearly, she is thinking about her own.

Qing

I don't see why you're glad about it. If her intentions were legitimate, she would have told Xuxian. Xiao Chan thinks he's using her to get our secrets, and she thinks she's tricking him into marrying her.

Suzhen

Oh dear. Is he selling everything under the sun for this new disease?

Qing

Of course, but what's more worrisome, he's hinting that it's been brought into town by outsiders. Several traders were attacked last market day and forced to leave.

Suzhen

Perhaps we're all getting too excited over nothing. The Ma boy has always been sickly. The nurse tending Old Xia was as old as him. If everyone were out working in the fields instead of idling the long winter nights inside, they wouldn't have time for all the gossip.

Qing

(*sees crowd of angry women approach*) Suzhen, go back inside. Mrs. Lao, Mrs. Fu and Xiao Jin, what can I do for you?

Lao

You can tell us what's going on! The Mayor says it's just a bit of winter flu, but we know it's not. A duck seller yesterday said that on the other side of the lake, three people have died. You're from there...what have you heard?

Qing

I don't know any more than you. We are cautioning everyone to stay warm, wear masks, and wash your hands...with soap.

Lao

Don't treat us like children.

Fu

We want to know how this sickness came. How long it will stay? How do we avoid it? What's the cure?

Qing

Ah, here comes Xuxian now. He can tell you. *(Xuxian enters and Qing disappears inside)*

Xuxian

Ladies, there's nothing to be worried about. Dr. Ping has just received instructions from the capital. It is best to avoid public places. Stay warm, serve nourishing food, and...

Jin

...wash hands.

Xuxian

Yes, that's very important. The virus can be transferred by dirty hands.

Fu

Can't you give us any antibiotic?

Xuxian

No, it's a virus. Antibiotics are only good for bacterial infection.

Jin

Well, give us something for virus.

Xuxian

An official from the capital is dispensing pills to keep down the fever, but it's not a cure. We can sell you a packet of the Jade Screen formula. Everyone in the family can take it. It's not a guarantee against the virus, but it strengthens the immune system. *(they go)*

Suling

I'm not sure you reassured them. They think you and all the officials are hiding something.

Xuxian

That's the problem with saying an honest, 'I don't know.'

Suling

They didn't shut the door.

Xuxian

They're afraid to touch it. Clean the handle with alcohol.

Suling

Will many die?

Xuxian

The weaker ones. The stronger will survive but their lungs might be permanently damaged.
(*calling*) Suzhen, how is the boy?

Suzhen

(*off stage*) Sleeping peacefully in Qing's arms.

Xuxian

Take him away! I told you, no one but you.

Suzhen

But....

Xuxian

She goes about everywhere. Who knows who she's come in contact with. Qing, come out now! (*enter Qing*)

Qing

What's wrong? My sister needs some relief.

Xuxian

I'm sorry, no one but Suzhen touches the baby, not even me.

Qing

All right. Is there really nothing we can do?

Xuxian

You can start combining the Jade Screen herbs. Fortunately, only we have all the twelve needed for the complete formula. Suzhen's garden is our saving grace. I think Xiao Chan's stockpiling of animal parts going to backfire.

Suling

Why?

Xuxian

When people learn that the virus started in the southern animal markets they won't want to have anything to do with animals.

Qing

I've never understood why those horrible markets are so popular.

Xuxian

Because quacks like Xiao Chan say they're needed for medicines.

Suling

People have short memories. Once the disease is passed, they'll be clamoring for animals again.

Xuxian

Maybe, but now everyone is drinking white radish and garlic soup.

Suling

At least the sick are being looked after. I've heard in the cities, hospitals have closed their doors; doctors have run away.

Xuxian

Trust! It's the first thing to go when people are scared. Fahai is the only person everyone trusts. I have to ask him to come.

Servant

(rushes in) Old Xia, the Mayor's father, has died.

Xuxian

Who was tending him?

Servant

No one dared to.

Xuxian

People have taken leave of their senses.

Servant

The mayor has ordered every house that has a sick member to be quarantined. He's also closed the whole town to outsiders. Until the disease has been contained, no one can go in or out. Especially you.

Xuxian

But I must treat the fever.

Servant

The Mayor said no. He said... *(hesitates)*

Xuxian

Yes? What?

Servant

That you brought the disease from the city to boost your business. Promote your own brand. You started it, and your foreign wife and her sister helped spread it. No one will come here anymore and you're not to go out. He holds you responsible for his father's death.

Suling

(cries) It's not true.

Xuxian

I don't blame him. Tell Mayor Xia, he has my deepest condolences, and to make sure that he himself avoids all risk of infection. (*servant exits*)

Suling

We're done for. He'll be our enemy forever.

Qing

You mean, for as long as he lives.

Xuxian

Enough! This is going to be a very long winter, but at least if we all stay healthy and work together, we'll be our best defense.

Suzhen

(*calls from inside*) Dinner's ready.

Xuxian

You go in. (*alone*) When small pox used to attack, people were so afraid, they couldn't bear to breathe the same air. Yet they were fascinated when I blew the magic powder up their children's nostrils to protect them until they learned it was actually powdered smallpox scabs, and then they wanted to kill me. But this time there's no magic and no science.

Suzhen

Here, I've brought you some soup. You have to keep up your strength.

Xuxian

Oh Suzhen, you're my pillar of strength. Only you have fulfilled my life, your love for me, your kindness to others has made my life blessed. I don't know what I'd do without you.

Suzhen

What are you talking? We're together forever.

Xuxian

Sorry. My thoughts are morbid because of this disease.

Suzhen

At least our family is well-provided for. Why do you take no comfort?

Xuxian

Unfortunately, my dear, Dr. Ping has brought me other bad news. He's heard that some of our new products are defective.

Suzhen

That can't be true. You've overseen every part of their production.

Xuxian

I know. I asked him to bring me a sample so I could check it myself. It was filled with impurities. Then I inspected the box. It looks like ours but the label printing is slightly defective.

Suzhen

A fake!

Xuxian

Proof of our success! Imitations are already flooding the market. Only close inspection will reveal the difference. And now everyone will suspect us.

Suzhen

Then the only thing we can do is to shut it down completely.

Xuxian

Yes, but we'll never be able to regain our credibility. And it's my fault. I expanded into a business I knew nothing about.

Suzhen

Don't blame yourself for others' evil. Go to bed, my love. We'll find a way out, but not tonight.

Xuxian

You're right. The morning may bring a little clarity. *(sleeps on bench)*
Black out

Scene 3 At Xuxian's pharmacy

(knocking in the dark)

Xuxian

What! Another death? *(lights a candle)* Fahai! I was hoping you'd come. You know the whole town is quarantined?

Fahai

Yes, I smelled death even up on the mountain.

Xuxian

You're not ill yourself?

Fahai

No.

Xuxian

I've been working around the clock, but this is a new threat. I'm glad you've come.

Fahai

Diseases, like people, get more subtle.

Xuxian

People take too many medicines nowadays. The body's *chi* is already weak. Dr Ping agrees with me, but Chan will never do anything that might jeopardize his profits.

Fahai

My business here concerns neither Ping nor Chan. The sickness might be new, but its cause is old.

Xuxian

It started in the wild animal markets, a mutant virus in civets jumped to humans.

Fahai

Indeed, it comes from inappropriate relations with animals.

Xuxian

The whole trade is an abomination. The health ministry should shut it down. I'm glad you agree with me. People were beginning to think I was to blame!

Fahai

You are to blame.

Xuxian

You mean, I've helped spread it? From the city? I wear a mask and wash my hands every time I enter and leave a house. Everyone sees the care I take.

Fahai

Your pollution goes much deeper and needs more thorough purging.

Xuxian

What do you mean?

Fahai

You're in an unholy alliance.

Xuxian

Fahai, we're old friends; be careful what you say.

Fahai

You know that only the most extreme emergency would bring me down here. I come not to save the town, but you, my friend. You're in mortal danger. The one you've married is not a woman but a snake.

Xuxian

Oh Fahai, you must have a bit of the fever yourself. Perhaps being alone up there too long has rattled your brain. My wife Suzhen has just given birth to a healthy human boy. No snake, even in your imagination, could do that.

Fahai

This isn't the time for jokes or complacency. Your union not only endangers you, its immorality has brought this plague.

Xuxian

Wait a minute—you're saying my marriage caused the disease? I've heard of such things happening in ancient times, when gods punished evil kings by making their people suffer, but I'm no powerful king. Nor have I done anything evil.

Fahai

In your ignorance, you have. It's my duty to help you. You must cast off the snake.

Xuxian

I won't. Men made up that 'woman as snake' story when they got tired of their lovers and wanted a convenient way to get rid of them. I'll leave this town before I leave Suzhen. She's the mother of my child and innocent of any crime. My old friend, I begin to suspect you're jealous. When I was a bachelor and you came to my house for a chat and a game of chess, we were good buddies. But the last time you came, I wasn't here, and instead my wife greeted you. You saw she was kind and beautiful, and knew our friendship would be affected.

Fahai

I saw immediately she wasn't what she pretended to be. And she knew I knew. She could fool you, my lovesick friend, but not me. But don't take my word for it. Find out for yourself. *(hands him bottle)*

Xuxian

(laughs) Hah! So that I'll hallucinate like you? See trees sprout wings and hear the flowers sing. The house cat becomes a tiger, and my beloved wife opens her mouth and a forked tongue wriggles between her lips. No, I won't take your potion, and I won't swallow your lies. I'll call her out now and you tell her to her face. Suzhen!

Suzhen

(calls) Xuxian, are you up? Are you hungry?

Xuxian

Come, monk, eat with us. Share the rice of someone you unjustly accuse.

Fahai

No, I'll return to the mountain. I'd hoped to do some good. I didn't realize your stubbornness would close your mind to reason.

Xuxian

Reason? What proof have you given me? Take a potion, you say. No, you prove my love a snake....without this. You forget, monk, I'm a pharmacist; I know what some herbs can do to the mind.

Fahai

Your words give me more anxiety. The Xuxian I knew would never talk to me like this.

Xuxian

You dishonor yourself and me by falsely accusing an innocent woman in her own house. Whatever happens, from now on, our friendship is at an end.

Fahai

I go with heavy heart, but I don't desert you. I'll be there when you need me.

Xuxian

Go! (*alone*) He wants me to be suspicious because Suzhen is too perfect. She healed so many people. He's unhappy she's come between us. He may be a holy man, a celibate, but still a man. And now this new virus plays right into his hands. He can blame her, a stranger in our midst. We should pack up and leave. But where can we go now? All the towns are quarantined. Besides, I can't leave the people I've served all of my life. I should break this bottle. No, I'll prove him utterly wrong. I'll love her even if she is a snake. (*heats the liquid*)

Suzhen

(*enters*) I've never been so cold. Chilled to the bone and can barely move. Please get the quilt from the top shelf.

Xuxian

I've heated some new wine. Here, it'll warm us up.

Suzhen

Wine? It tastes odd. I feel its heat go all the way through me. Goodnight, my love, may tomorrow bring warmer weather and an end to this plague.

Xuxian

Good-night, sweet and gentle...wife. Oh, my head's on fire! Suzhen? Everything's moving. She stirs again. Suzhen, are you awake? (*in the dark, holding candle*) The quilt moves, she stretches her body, her arm comes out, no, not an arm. Her foot comes out the other end, no, not a foot. Her face is still my beloved's but oh, horror...But is it true? Or are my eyes dazed by Fahai's drug. I can't tell, is it me or her?

Fahai's Voice

First, the tail, and then the head, too, will reveal its true form. Will you be able to share a pillow with that?

Xuxian

She'd never have revealed herself without your poison. If she has the power to conceal, I, too, have the self control not to inquire.

Fahai's Voice

Too late for that. Not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually she'll attack you.

Xuxian

No! She loves me.

Fahai's Voice

She must revert to her nature. Her humanity is only a temporary guise. You must leave her to survive.

Xuxian

I don't want to survive without her.

Fahai's Voice

Don't talk nonsense. Your thoughts are muddled with passion. Come to the hermitage to meditate and clear your mind. Then you'll realize what you must do. (*Xuxian rushes out*)
Black out.

Scene 4 At Xuxian's pharmacy

Suling

There've been no more new cases for over a week. The quarantine's been lifted. Do you think he went to the city to save our product line?

Suzhen

He would have sent some message.

Qing

Perhaps he caught the virus and quarantined himself.

Suzhen

He would have sent word.

Suling

The last time you saw him, he...?

Suzhen

He acted a little strangely, but wasn't ill. He had just learned about the fakes, and was, quite naturally, distraught.

Suling

That's why I think he must be doing something about them. He wants to keep the whole business as quiet as possible till he's able to sort it out. We're out of green chiretta. (*chuanxinlian*) I'm going out to get more. (*exit*)

Suzhen

She's going to the mountain by herself?

Qing

She's on her way to Xiao Chan's. She might not come back.

Suzhen

Nonsense.

Qing

You think Xuxian knows?

Suzhen

Yes. I'm certain.

Qing

How can he?

Suzhen

I don't know, but he must. It's the only reason he would disappear without a word.

Qing

I can't believe he'd desert you.

Suzhen

Oh, my mind is in a muddle. I dreamt of Fahai last night. His eyes like coals burned, my skin crackled and peeled off. I need Xuxian to protect me from that monk.

Qing

He's left to protect himself.

Suzhen

Fahai has frightened him! Lured him away from me. I must go to the hermitage.

Qing

No, wait. Xuxian won't stay away long. His son is still here.

Black out

Scene 5 At Fahai's hermitage

Xuxian

Thank you for taking me in, even after I was so unjust. This has been the hardest time of my life. I've followed your instructions, meditated...and prayed, and now, I must return to my family.

Fahai

No.

Xuxian

Now I can bear it. I must return.

Fahai

You cannot. What you think is strength is really weakness. You miss your woman and don't understand the viciousness of the snake.

Xuxian

I have faith in her loving nature.

Fahai

It is precisely her *nature* that is not loving.

Xuxian

Then I can love...even a snake.

Fahai

Such spirits play to our weaknesses. Have you never considered how or why she so perfectly matches your needs? Knowledgeable about herbs. Skilled in making medicines. Advancing new ideas you imagined but never dared act upon. Supporting all your endeavors but gently controlling their direction. Why did you never quarrel, never have differences like normal couples? Because as a pliable snake, she molds herself to you whichever way you turn. But beware the day she chooses to squeeze, and show her fangs. You'll be as helpless as a mouse.

Xuxian

I've considered all the risks and am willing to take them. I must go back.

Fahai

I won't let you.

Xuxian

It's not your decision, nor your right.

Fahai

But it is within my power. *(he looks up as if sensing someone else's presence)* Return to your room. We'll talk again later. *(Xuxian exits, seemingly against his will)*

Suling

(enters) Oh, holy one.

Fahai

What do you want?

Suling

I've only come with our monthly contribution.

Fahai

It can be left in the shrine box without bothering me. Wait! You've never offered this before.

Suling

It's from my new family...the Chans.

Fahai

What! You've married with your brother gone?

Suling

He deserted us! Leaving us three women alone during the sickness. Not knowing what to do, I requested Mr. Chan's help and he proposed that I marry his son. I agreed. While the disease still lingered, we kept it a secret, but now, we'll be having a ceremony soon. That's why...

Fahai

You've brought the money. Your sister-in-law is on her own then?

Suling

Yes, she and her sister. No one comes to the shop anymore. I blame her for all my brother's misfortunes.

Fahai

So do I.

Suling

I trust she'll leave soon.

Fahai

So that you and Chan can take over the business before your brother returns? Yes, she must go...but not with the child.

Suling

Of course not. It's a Liang. Do you want me...?

Fahai

No, you stay out of it. May your marriage bring you prosperity.

Suling

It already has. (*exit*)

Fahai

Slippery conniving piece of flesh! No doubt Xiao Chan thinks she loves him. I'll write to the snake that I have her husband. She'll come with the child, using it to persuade him to return. Because she loves him, she'll do anything to save him.

Black out

Scene 6 At Fahai's hermitage.

(*Qing enters, interrupting Fahai's meditation.*)

Fahai

What are you doing here?

Qing

You were no doubt expecting my sister?

Fahai

Xuxian requested her to come.

Qing

(*lights incense*) Can't I, like others, come to the shrine and pray?

Fahai

You don't fool me. I know what you are.

Qing

And I know who wrote that letter. You see, we have meditated for a thousand years and in return, we've been blessed with our current form and mind. Do you defy The Buddha's blessing?

Fahai

Your sister did not maintain her purity. She deceived Xuxian.

Qing

She harbored no evil intent; her love for the man is as pure and devoted as that of the best human wife.

Fahai

No, she has bound the man, and will soon bind the son as well. She exceeds even normal earthly appetites.

Qing

Even if you reveal her to Xuxian, he'll still love her.

Fahai

Their feelings no longer matter; the townspeople won't allow it. Even his honesty and her kindness will turn against them. You should be grateful for my warning.

Qing

Why?

Fahai

To end it before the situation turns violent. If Xuxian persists in fornicating with a snake, the people will tear you all to pieces.

Qing

And drink our blood for good measure? Is that why you told Xiao Chan to start the rumor about the plague being a punishment?

Fahai

Their miscegenation *is* the cause.

Qing

Nonsense. The filth in the wild animal markets is. The crowded caging and killing, the mix of blood and shit, fetid breeding ground of bacteria and virus.

Fahai

The filth of animals has indeed transferred to humans. The two should remain apart, each in its own sphere.

Qing

Then speak out against the poaching and eating of wild creatures....for health!

Fahai

This is not a health issue but a moral one.

Qing

Precisely. The careless genocide of species is immoral, not the marriage. Remember, if you kill my sister, you kill Xuxian too.

Fahai

I save him.

Qing

Monk, why do rail against them when you're silent about so many real evils?

Fahai

It transgresses the natural order; bestiality is taboo in every culture. It threatens the stability of the human family.

Qing

I see. The bank in town has a new banner outside that reads, "We are family." An airline advertises, "Join the family in the skies." An insurance company claims to treat customers 'as family.' Do these not transgress moral boundaries and degrade the family? Yet, you say nothing. The wife beatings, the killing of baby girls, and yet, you say nothing. But a loving couple who has never done anyone any harm, a man who was once your best friend marries a beautiful woman and suddenly your universe collapses.

Fahai

(grabs her) How dare you?

Qing

Hah! You've touched a woman! Now you'll have to spend the next hundred days purifying yourself. *(recants)* No, no. I'm sorry. I beg you to give me a little time and I'll persuade them to leave.

Fahai

As long as they transgress, they cannot escape.

Qing

A man who has removed himself from humanity to judge it is worse than a snake.

Fahai

You rail at me but you know I'm right. I don't fear or hate snakes. They visit me here, and coil at my feet when I meditate. The cobra Mucalinda shielded our Lord Buddha with his hood from the storm. I recognize your beneficence and strength, but you must see this relationship is forbidden.

Qing

If our austerities allowed us to become human, we should be allowed to interact with humans....in every way.

Fahai

In every way?

Qing

(faltering) In the way....that my sister has. Her self-denying love is proof of her humanity.

Fahai

But not you?

Qing

I've not been so moved. My duty is to her.

Fahai

Well, go now.

Qing

You won't say anything? You won't let him go?

Fahai

Come again, tomorrow. Perhaps, I'll have found another way...

Qing

Let Kwanyin's mercy give you inspiration. *(leaves)*

Fahai

Is this her fault or mine? Is it the tempter or the tempted who sins most? I've laughed at Xuxian's folly and counseled other men against women who have the power to persuade the clouds out of the sky. Now I, too, feel the sweet poison of the serpent's tooth. I'll fast and meditate to squeeze this venom from my body. *(he closes his eyes and tries to meditate)*. I see nothing but her face. My mantra cannot silence the sweetness of her voice. How clever of you, Mara, to bait your hook with one of your daughters disguised with such indignant beauty! Most dangerous is the temptation that urges us to sin in loving virtue.

Black out

Scene 7 At Fahai's hermitage

Suzhen

(enters with child) Xuxian, I got your message and came as fast as I could.

Xuxian

I didn't send any message. Go quickly before Fahai comes. He wants to destroy you.

Suzhen

I don't care about him. I want to know your mind. If you still love me then nothing else matters.

Xuxian

I do love you.

Suzhen

And you know?

Xuxian

Yes, and still love you. In a moment of weakness, I ran away. But if you can endure, so can I.

Suzhen

Then there's nothing Fahai can do. I can wait an eternity.

Xuxian

No, he's turning the town against you. You must leave and take the boy with you.

Suzhen

No, I won't go. Fahai will have to tear us apart. *(she moves toward Xuxian who suddenly shudders)*

Fahai

(jumps out and catches her) Hah, I have you, snake. The man rejects you. His mouth speaks love, but his body tells a deeper truth. Xuxian, take the boy and go.

Suzhen

Don't leave me.

Xuxian

I can't help it. This is stronger than me. Stronger than my love. *(exit)*

Suzhen

But not stronger than mine! *(Fahai takes her inside)*
Black out

Scene 8 At Fahai's hermitage

Qing

Fahai, come out. Release my sister.

Fahai

Your stormy looks don't frighten me.

Qing

I'm not afraid of you either, you fake monk.

Fahai

Leave, while you're still free to do so.

Qing

Release Suzhen, or I'll bring such torrents as this mountain has never seen. Landslides will wipe away the town forever.

Fahai

One word from me and the people will drink your blood.

Qing

Keep your head bowed, monk. You can't threaten me; I'm no ordinary woman.

Fahai

Precisely. As soon as you're challenged, you devolve back to your snake instincts.

Qing

I merely fight a misguided power with a just one.

Fahai

That's not a woman's best weapon. If you wish to save your sister, you should be more like her. Pliancy should be your persuasion. Tender lips win more than stormy eyes. Control the tempest, and forego your cold-blooded indifference. Show that self same weakness as your sister...

Qing

And find myself in her position?

Fahai

I'm not muddle-headed like Xuxian. Our powers are more evenly matched.

Qing

Sweet words from a monk's mouth? Shameless now, and ashamed after, when you'd curse me as an evil spirit sent to tempt you. You cannot have it both ways, monk.

Fahai

But I can. It's you who are in conflict with yourself. When you became human, you took on a female's destiny.

Qing

I'm still an ancient deity that has never submitted to your cult.

Fahai

Submit now and go, and within three years, I'll release your sister.

Qing

Why three years?

Fahai

Xuxian will have taken a wife and forgotten the snake.

Qing

No, never! The tempest begins now!

Fahai

She's imprisoned under the temple. The landslides will only bury her deeper. She'll never be found or released.

Qing

It's you, Fahai, who won't know her fate. You're mortal and will die. *(thunder and lightning)*
Black out

Epilogue

(Yun stands with a live snake wrapped around her. Grandfather enters aghast.)

Yun

I found her in a clay pot trapped under the temple. She's been waiting for me so long.

Grandfather

(frightened) Put it down, now!

Yun

Don't come near, you'll frighten her.

Grandfather

It'll bite you. It'll strangle you to death.

Yun

No, she knows who I am. We've been separated by many misunderstandings, but we've found each other at last. (*Yun kneels down and lets the snake glide off*) Now, she'll return to her home and I to mine. We don't need to look for each other any more.

Grandfather

I should have never have told you the story.

Yun

You couldn't help it. I would have found out anyway. Once there were two snakes, one white as cloud and the other green as bamboo, who meditated for a thousand years and finally achieved their wish to become human. (*crack of thunder, two giant puppet snakes dance*)

The End