

Chapter 1

Weiwei

WEIWEI WAS BORN in 1961. By 1976 she was fifteen, the age when most girls blossom. If you suppose, because her mother Wang Qiyao was beautiful, that Weiwei must have been pretty too, you would be gravely mistaken. Weiwei was not particularly attractive; although she did inherit her mother's eyes, they were the kind of eyes that look dull unless lit up by charm and emotion. The period in which Weiwei grew up, however, was incapable of providing the environment for honing those qualities. She couldn't help but be dull; there was even a rather coarse air about her. To be attractive during those years, a girl needed to rely on genuine merit: there was no room for weakness. Weiwei obviously did not qualify as "good-looking." She would often overhear people discussing her, saying how she wasn't as pretty as her mother. Such comments fostered a jealousy in her, especially as she entered puberty. Seeing how young and graceful her mother still appeared, she felt that she was being robbed of her own beauty. Those comments also had an effect on her mother, allowing her to maintain the psychological upper hand. Wang Qiyao could calmly face her maturing daughter without the oppressive feeling that her own time was ticking away. As soon as Weiwei was old enough to fit into Wang Qiyao's outfits, she began fighting with her mother over clothes. Occasionally Wang Qiyao would, with the best intentions, tell her daughter that a certain dress was too old-fashioned for her; but that would only make Weiwei want to wear it even more. She acted as if her mother had only said that as a dirty trick to prevent her from wearing the dress.

With two women in the house and no man to smooth things over, things often got difficult. If, however, you were to think that they might have been ostracized because Weiwei did not have a father, you couldn't be more wrong. Even though people whispered behind their backs, no

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one ever gave them any trouble; in fact, some people even pitied them and tried to help. As far as trouble went, they had only themselves to blame. Like all women locked in a power struggle, they were always scheming against each other. In 1976 Wang Qiyao was forty-seven years old, but she looked at least ten years younger. This was even more noticeable when she was with her daughter, for she appeared to be the handsomer older sister. But beauty is one thing, youth another. There is nothing one can do to turn back the clock. In the end youth always has the upper hand, for it confers privileges that are absolute and uncontestable—and those were always there for Weiwei to draw upon. And so Wang Qiyao was also jealous of her daughter—Weiwei had something on her mother after all. Mother and daughter had the upper hand at different times, depending on which perspective you viewed the situation from.

Every year, on the hottest day of summer, Wang Qiyao would air out all her clothes. She would open her camphor chest, hang the clothes out on bamboo poles, and spread her assortment of leather shoes on the windowsill. The entire room would be filled with particles of dust swirling in the sunlight. For a time Weiwei looked like she was walking on stilts when she tried on her mother's shoes. Her feet could only fill out the points of the shoes; after taking a few steps, she would fall down. But as the years went by her feet gradually filled out the high-heels. The laddered silk stockings at the bottom of the chest also excited her: putting her hand inside them, she would stretch them out in the sunlight to view the translucent silk, which resembled the wings of a cicada. Her hands grew bigger each year and eventually ripped through the stockings. And then there was the beaded handbag, the broken pearl necklace, the brooch with a missing diamond, and the moth-eaten flannel beret, scattered in the corners of the chest, which together composed a colorful and exotic portrait of another time. In the sunlight the portrait was a bit dull, even depressing—a peeling oil painting whose faded paint had lost its original luster but still held on to some of its splendor.

When Weiwei tried on those old clothes and accessories and looked in the mirror, she saw not a person but a witch! Affecting what she took to be the poses of a bad girl, she giggled until she doubled over. She couldn't imagine what her mother had looked like back then, nor could she fathom the kind of world her mother had lived in. Today's world may have been insipid and boring, but it was superior because it was hers. Occasionally Weiwei would intentionally damage some of the items at the bottom of her mother's chest; she might pinch a few tufts of fur off a collar, or pull

out a few strands of silk from the satin *cheongsam*, and wait for her mother to scold her so that she would have an opportunity to talk back. But come sunset, when Wang Qiyao put her things away, she wouldn't always notice; even when she did, her reaction was always rather mild. She would hold the damaged article up to the light and examine it carefully before folding it up again and putting it away.

"Who knows if I'll ever have the chance to wear this thing again . . ." she would say.

This made Weiwei a bit depressed; she felt sorry for her mother and was even slightly remorseful, not out of compassion and kindness, but from the wanton arrogance of youth. The world belonged to her—why should she bother to harass an old lady like her mother? In her eyes anyone even ten years older qualified as "old." Sometimes she referred to someone as an "old lady" or "old man" when they were actually still in their thirties—we won't mention what she must have thought of people in their forties!

But deep down Weiwei had a slight inferiority complex that often led her to overlook her own positive qualities. That's the way young people are: lacking the requisite experience to take advantage of their best traits, too impressionable, and short of self-confidence. The result of all this was that she became reluctant to go out with her mother. Whenever her mother was around, Weiwei couldn't help putting on a look of dissatisfaction, an added detriment to her appearance. As a little girl, she depended upon her mother and had to suppress her sense of frustration. But as the proverbial wings got stronger, her feelings of dependence faded, her frustration intensified, and mother-daughter conflicts escalated.

In 1976 Weiwei, now a high school freshman, continued to be lackadaisical in her studies and so naturally had no political aspirations. She was a typical girl from Huaihai Road for whom window-shopping was a daily routine. What she saw displayed in the shop windows represented a life-style she could reach out and touch, with nothing of the grand illusion about it. It represented a life beyond the bare necessities to which she could aspire; you might call it the aesthetics of living—a spiritual dimension to enhance her material pursuits. Girls like Weiwei are molded by a distinctive aesthetics of living. In Shanghai, nowhere will you find girls with a better fashion sense than those who lived around Huaihai Road. The way they wear their clothing is a concrete manifestation of this aesthetics of living. The special charm they lend to a simple blue blouse simply by the way they wear it could take your breath away.

Back in the era when people were deprived of entertainment and excitement, the slightest thing was enough to light up a young lady's life. These girls were in no way less impressive than people who fought heroically against the currents. Moreover, they spoke less and took action more often. They devoted themselves to promoting a life based on passion and a "tell-it-like-it-is" philosophy. If you were to walk down Huaihai Road during the late sixties or early seventies, you would sense, beneath the hypocritical and empty political lives people were leading, a heart that was beating vigorously. Of course you would have to look closely to see it. You could find it in the slight curls at the tips of otherwise straight hair, in shirt collars peeping out from underneath blue uniforms, and in the way scarves were tied with fancy shoestring bows. It was remarkably subtle, and the care people put into those details was moving.

Weiwei's dream for after high school was to work behind the counter selling wool sweaters at a local government department store. To be fair, career choices in that era were limited, and Weiwei was not the ambitious type, nor was she a great thinker. Her plans for the future were based on what she thought others were doing. In this respect she was no match for Wang Qiyao, but naturally this also had to do with the limitations of her time. In short, Weiwei was a typical Huaihai Road girl; she didn't stand out, but neither did she lag behind—she was one of the masses, a face in the crowd.

1976 was a year of epochal change; the impact it had on Weiwei lay all within the realm of the aesthetics of living. The return of classic movies was one area, of high-heeled shoes another, and of perms yet another. It was only natural that Wang Qiyao too should get a perm. Maybe the hairdresser's skills were rusty, or maybe she just wasn't used to curly hair after so many decades of seeing only straight hair, but when she reached home, Wang Qiyao was extremely upset. Her new perm looked like a chicken's nest, sloppy and unkempt, and it made her look old. No matter how she combed it, she just couldn't get it right. She scolded herself for having gone and the beauty salon for advertising something they obviously couldn't deliver.

It was right around that time that Weiwei and her classmate went to have the tips of their pigtails and their bangs permed. Their new haircuts were quite sharp and they looked cute. Weiwei came home in high spirits, never expecting that her mother would say she looked like a Suzhou maid from the old days. But her mother's comments didn't bother Weiwei too much. She knew that her mother had been in a bad mood ever since the perm turned out badly. She not only let her mother speak her

mind without talking back, but even tried to help Wang Qiyao roll and set her hair. Standing behind her mother in the mirror, Weiwei saw that she now had the upper hand. Wang Qiyao, recalling that the Buddhists had referred to hair as the “strands of vexation,” went back to the beauty salon a few days later to have her hair cut especially short, which made her look smashing in a completely new way. Leaving the beauty salon, she noticed the deep blue sky and the glowing red sun, and felt the gentle wind caressing her face. Weiwei took one look at her mother and realized that by comparison she really did look like a Suzhou maid. She couldn’t help but feel cranky. This time it was Wang Qiyao’s turn to help fix *her* hair. But deep down Weiwei held on to her belief that all her mother’s words of advice were just ploys to make her look bad. She went against everything that Wang Qiyao said. Eventually Wang Qiyao lost her temper and walked off, leaving Weiwei to gaze at herself in the mirror alone; before long she began to cry. After a scene like that, at least three days of mutual avoidance would pass before mother and daughter spoke to each other again.

The following year the clothing industry began to prosper and numerous new designs began to crop up on the streets. Old timers could see the root of these new designs in old pre-liberation outfits. Wang Qiyao mourned the clothes in her chest that she had sold or allowed to deteriorate because she thought she could never wear them again. Weiwei listened patiently as her mother went on and on, describing the style and material of each item and where she had first worn it. She thought back to all those times when her mother hung those outfits out to sun, and realized that her mother’s good days were in the past, while her own were reaching out to her. She rushed forward to answer the call of the new world. She and her classmates nearly wore out the doormats of all the clothing stores and tailor shops in Shanghai. They spent more time talking about fashion than they did on studying. They watched foreign films over and over again as if they were fashion albums. Coming from a world where consumers had no choices, they were overwhelmed by the rich, colorful world they were entering.

A small minority instinctively found their direction and strutted out onto the front lines of fashion, and so took on the role of leaders. But average girls like Weiwei couldn’t avoid a few wrong turns and had to pay their dues. Had Weiwei been willing to listen to her mother’s advice, she would have probably been able to get on the right track a bit quicker. But she was determined always to be different from her mother. When her mother said “east,” she would say “west.” She worked hard at keeping up

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with the trends but invariably failed. Every so often she would come sulking to Wang Qiyao for more money to have new outfits made. When the finished products turned out to be different from what she had hoped, she would go sulking again to her mother. As she watched with resentment how her mother, simply by combining different items from the chest, easily took her place at the head of the crowd, Weiwei paid dearly in money and feeling, struggling every step of the way.

But hard work will eventually pay off, and just a year later Weiwei began to get the gist of this fashion thing. You needed only look at her to know what the hottest fashion on the street was. And once she caught up, Weiwei lightened up quite a bit. She developed the power to differentiate between the false starts and the genuine trends that she needed to keep up with in order not to fall behind. Looking back on the year before, she was relieved to have emerged from that state of confusion. One should not look down on this eagerness to be trendy—it belongs to the heart that is common to all. Day after day, night after night, it is this desire that holds up and sustain this city's prosperity. This common heart, being pure and clear, is best able to take stock of the changing times. Like the evergreen, it is eternal.

After her high school graduation Weiwei didn't go on to sell wool sweaters, but rather enrolled in an institute of hygiene; it was situated in the suburbs of Shanghai, so she came home only once a week. There were many more girls than boys at the institute, and when a bunch of girls get together, competition becomes inevitable. Everyone was vying to buy nicer shoes and clothing. Every Saturday, when she came home, Weiwei would hit the streets to catch up on the latest styles, as if making up for her time away from Huaihai Road. Wang Qiyao had long since retired the sign advertising inoculation shots and only took on some light knitting jobs at the factory. There used to be a shortage of people to handle this kind of work, but once the educated youths came back from the countryside at the end of the Cultural Revolution there wasn't enough work to go around. Of course, that meant less money.

To cover Weiwei's clothing expenses and occasionally buy something new for herself, Wang Qiyao had had to dip into Director Li's legacy. She would wait until Weiwei was not around before taking one of the gold bars down to the Bank of China on the Bund and exchange it for cash. She sighed to herself, *Even when I was starving I never touched that money. How ironic that I should turn to it now that we don't have to worry about bare necessities anymore.* She was aware that once she cashed in the first gold bar, it would be hard to stop; like losing your teeth, once one

has dropped out, you know the rest will follow. This left her with a feeling of emptiness. But all the stores on the street were reaching out to her; even if she could make it through today, would she be able to resist tomorrow? The world in Wang Qiyao's eyes was not the new world that Weiwei saw but an old one in which there was a chance for her to relive her dreams. So much gaiety that she thought was lost had suddenly returned! Her happiness exceeded that of Weiwei because she knew better than Weiwei the price and meaning of that happiness.

Wang Qiyao had always kept the story of the gold bars from Weiwei. Just think of all the clothes Weiwei would have demanded if she had known her mother's secret! So whenever Weiwei asked for money, Wang Qiyao would remain tightfisted. At those moments Weiwei would think of her father—how many more outfits she would be able to get if she had had a father's income to help support her. Otherwise she never really felt she needed a father. Ever since she was little, Wang Qiyao had told Weiwei that her father was dead. That's what she told others as well. By the time Weiwei was old enough to ask questions, there were virtually no male visitors frequenting their home; female visitors were scarce as well, with the exception of Madame Yan from down the street at 74 Peace Lane. There was Grandma too, but they visited her no more than once a year.

All this meant that Weiwei's life was quite simple. She looked mature for her age, but inwardly she was still a child. She didn't understand anything besides fashion. But you can't blame her, because there was no one there to teach her those other things. In this she stood out as an exception to the other girls on Huaihai Road, who tended to be quite ambitious. Most families living in the central district of Huaihai Road belong to the middle of the economic spectrum. Exposed to the greatest opulence Shanghai had to offer, it was only natural for the girls to feel the sting of inequality, and they were prepared to do whatever it took to get what they felt entitled to. Heading west, the shops thinned out; here the quiet streets were lined with luxury apartments and Western-style houses—another world altogether. This is where the true masters of Huaihai Road lived, and that was where all those young girls from central Huaihai Road dreamed they would one day live. Weiwei never figured this out. She had a one-track mind—to hit her mother up for more money. Occasionally, when Wang Qiyao complained about how tough things were, Weiwei would cry about her family circumstances. But before long all of that would be forgotten and she'd be back for more money. Whenever her begging paid off, she was so ecstatic that she never even

thought to ask where the money came from. As long as Wang Qiyao didn't volunteer the information, Weiwei would never know about the gold bars.

Now when the time came to sun their clothes, Weiwei would have her own pile—from the wool cape draped over her when she was still being breastfed to the trendy bell-bottom pants she had worn the previous year—these were like the cast-off shells of a molting cicada. For Shanghai women old clothes are the shells they shed during their metamorphoses. Their age is shown through their clothing; but the heart lying beneath the garments sometimes forgets to grow up. Wang Qiyao examined her clothing carefully for signs of mildew. Most of her outfits were still in fairly good shape—she had only stopped wearing them because they had gone out of style. But she knew that before long they would be back in fashion again. That is the law of fashion, which is based on the principle of cycles. Over decades of experience, she had learned that no matter how much fashion changes, some principles remain constant; every outfit has one collar and two sleeves, and no amount of creativity can make it end up with two collars and three sleeves. There are only so many designs, and their rotation is what defines fashion. Only sometimes a cycle drags on too long; Wang Qiyao was more than willing to wait it out, until the arrival of the next cycle, but she was getting older and knew all too well that time waits for no one.

She thought of that pink satin *cheongsam*: how thousands on thousands of hearts had been used up in the making of that dress, and how she had been the very incarnation of beauty when she wore it. For so many years it had languished at the bottom of the chest as she waited for the day to wear it again—that day was fast approaching, but how could she possibly wear it? She was much too old. Just thinking about such matters brought tears to her eyes. Time is hardest on a woman. Days pass, one by one, unnoticed, never to return. How could they have so quickly turned into ten years, twenty years? Airing out the clothes often made her sad; each outfit was a shadow from the past. As her clothes showed holes left by moths, started to fall apart, or became mildewed, she knew that the past was growing more and more distant.

Wang Qiyao let Weiwei try on her pink *cheongsam* once. To recreate her own youth, she even helped her daughter put her hair up. But when Weiwei stood before her wearing her dress, Wang Qiyao felt bewildered. What she saw was not herself, but Weiwei all grown up. Weiwei was much bigger and taller, and the *cheongsam* was tight on her and a bit short. The fabric had begun to yellow and had lost its luster; anyone

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could tell that it was old just by glancing at it. It just didn't look right on Weiwei, who paced back and forth in front of the mirror, giggling until she doubled over. The old *cheongsam* had not made her into a proper young Shanghai lady. Instead it set off her unrestrained youthful gaiety, which literally was bursting through the seams. Weiwei clowned around in front of the mirror until, having gotten her kicks, she took off the *cheongsam*. Instead of putting it back into the chest, Wang Qiyao simply threw it aside. She caught sight of it several times after that while cleaning, but always pretended not to see it. And gradually, over time, it was forgotten.