odd tone of her voice caused my father to look with alarm at her. “I can not take back my curses. It is too late.” She took hold of my father’s arm: “It was all white and had pink eyes like sacred fire.”

My father started at this, and they both looked pale. My brothers and sister, clearing the table, froze in their gestures.

“The fog has confused you,” Stepmother said. “It was just a cat.”

But Grandmama shook her head, for she knew it was a sign. “I will not live forever,” she said. “I am prepared.”

The next morning she was confined to her bed with a severe cold. Sitting by her, playing with some of my toys, I asked her about the cat.

“Why did Father jump at the cat with the pink eyes? He didn’t see it, you did.”

“But he and your mother know what it means.”

“What?”

“My friend, the juggler, the magician, was as pale as white jade, and he had pink eyes.” I thought she would begin to tell me one of her stories, a tale of enchantment or of a wondrous adventure, but she only paused to swallow; her eyes glittered, lost in memory. She took my hand, gently opening and closing her fingers over it. “Sek-Lung,” she sighed, “he has come back to me.”

Then Grandmama sank back into her pillow and the embroidered flowers lifted to frame her wrinkled face. I saw her hand over my own, and my own began to tremble. I fell fitfully asleep by her side. When I woke up it was dark and her bed was empty. She had been taken to the hospital and I was not permitted to visit.

A few days after that she died of the complications of pneumonia. Immediately after her death my father came home and said nothing to us, but walked up the stairs to her room, pulled aside the drawn lace curtains of her window and lifted the wind chimes to the sky.

I began to cry and quickly put my hand in my pocket for a handkerchief. Instead, caught between my fingers, was the small, round firmness of the jade peony. In my mind’s eye I saw Grandmama smile and heard, softly, the pink centre beat like a beautiful, cramped heart.