Opening extract from

Little Leap Forward

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Illustrated by

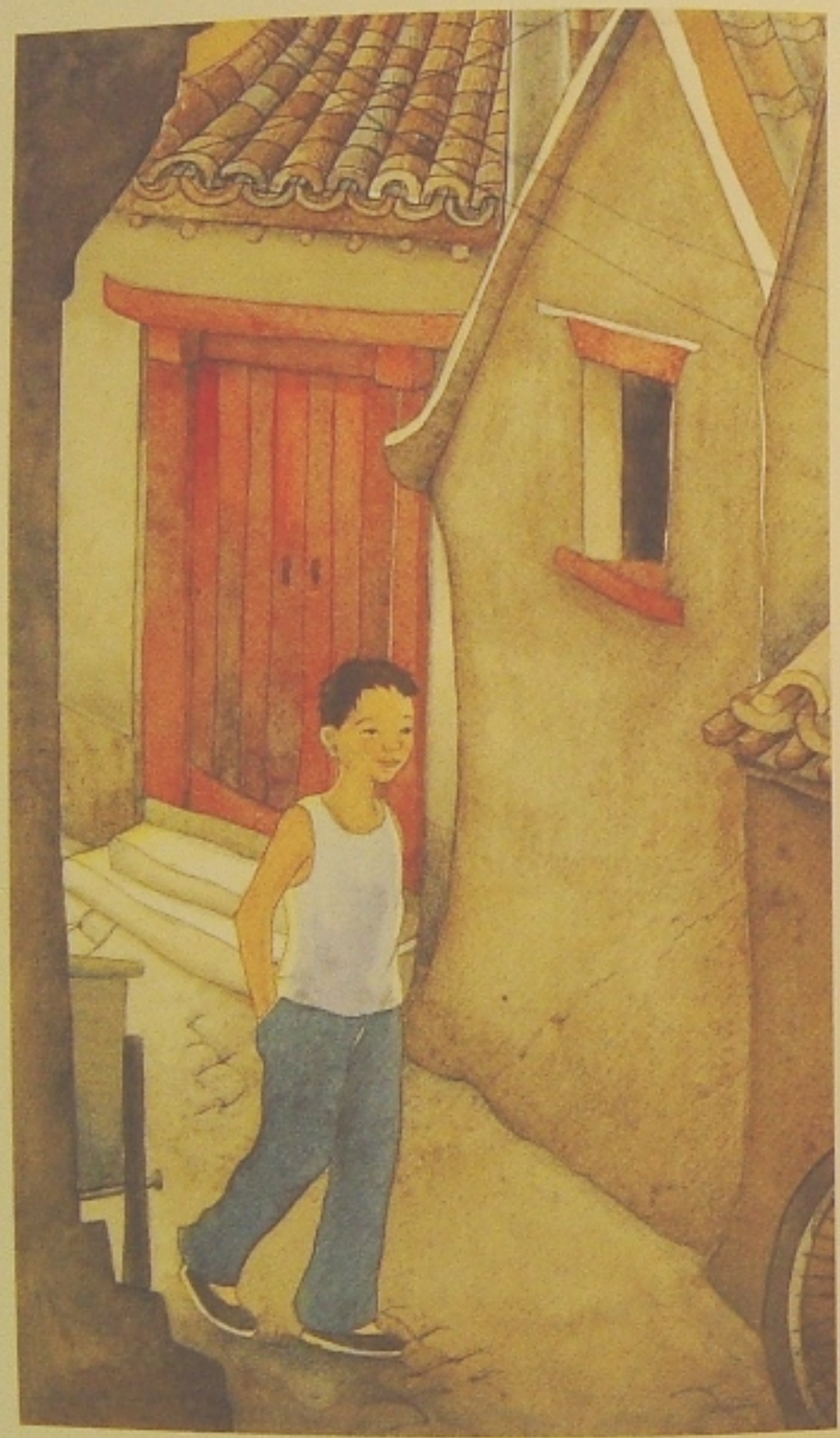
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CHAPTER ONE

THE DRUM AND BELL TOWERS

WHEN I WAS A LITTLE BOY, I lived in an old courtyard in Beijing, China, between the Drum Tower, the Bell Tower and the river. My home was in the poor and overcrowded *hutongs* – a maze of dark, narrow alleys and high brick walls, with grey earth on the ground and big wooden gates leading into courtyards. You had to look up and up to see the sky. Some gates had old stone lions guarding them, and sloping roofs with tiles shaped like waves.

'The workers of the Emperor used to live here, Little Leap Forward, five hundred years ago,'

my mother told me, 'and the huge drum and bell in the towers used to sound every hour.'

I imagined the Emperors' workers, like bees in a hive, filling the alleys with the scent of honey.

'Did you know that bees dance, Ma?' I asked.

'Do they, Little Leap Forward?' my mother answered, a smile flickering in her dark eyes, making them shine.

'Yes,' I continued, 'and Ma, I think silkworms dance too, but very slowly, when they are making their silk. I have watched them.'

My mother burst out laughing.

'I think you have a very vivid imagination, Little Leap Forward!' she said.

The Drum and Bell Towers had been silent since my mother was a little girl in the 1920s, when the last Emperor of China had lost his power and his title, and people in the alleys had modern clocks for the first time in their homes. My mother had her own very special clock – from Russia. It was

made of clear crystal. I liked to see the tiny wheels turning inside, measuring time. But how much more wonderful, I thought, to feel the power of the massive drum and bell, sounding through the alleys.

Inside our small, traditional courtyard, in a long low building with many doors, I lived in two rooms with my mother, brother and four older sisters. Four other families lived in the same building in our courtyard, and they were all musicians. My father had been a musician too: he had played the Chinese violin. When I was very little I had watched him rehearse in the big modern courtyard not far from our home, where many of the musicians in his orchestra lived and where they practised. It was full of cherry trees that blossomed in the spring and a mulberry tree that I often climbed when I was older, to collect leaves for my silkworms to eat. I kept these tiny artists in a box in our inner room, where we kept all of our



special things.

My father's violin had two strings, a bow made of horses' hair and a dragon's head carved on the top. He could make this instrument sound like horses neighing and galloping on the Mongolian grasslands.

'Just remember,' he once said to me, as he made a red boiled sweet appear as if by magic out of the red silk velvet lining of his violin case, 'with music and your imagination you can travel anywhere; you will always be free.'

My father had died two years before, when I was five, nearly six years old.

'Do I look like Baba?' I asked my mother, as she sat sewing in the dim light of our outer room one evening, after she had returned from her work as a teacher.

'Let me look at you,' she said, taking my face in her beautiful hands.

'Yes. Yes, there is something in those deep



brown eyes, and in the corners of your mouth when you smile – there is something that reminds me of him.'

'I'm going to be a musician too, Ma!' I said.

'Are you, Little Leap Forward? And will you write music for your silkworms to dance to?'

She looked steadily into my eyes, and I felt a rush of love for her.

'Little Leap Forward,' my sister Swallow called from the courtyard. 'Come and wash the vegetables!'

Lowering her head, my mother returned to the blue padded jacket she was mending, moving the big needle slowly through the thick cotton material.