

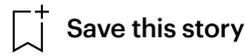
FICTION

IMMORTAL HEART

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These are the things I must not forget: I was raised among the Liu clan in the rocky Western Hills south of Peking, in Immortal Heart village. My nursemaid, Precious Auntie, who could speak only by making signs with her hands, taught me how to write the character for heart on my chalkboard. *Watch now, Lu Ling, she ordered, and began to draw: See this curving stroke? That's the bottom of the heart, where blood gathers.* And as I traced the character, she asked, *Whose dead heart gave shape to this word? How did it begin?*

Immortal Heart village lay in a valley that dropped into a deep limestone ravine. The ravine was shaped like the curved chamber of a heart, and the three streams that had once fed and drained the ravine were the heart's artery and veins. Now nothing was left of the waterways but cracked gullies and the stench of a fart.

The Liu clan had lived in Immortal Heart for six centuries. During that time, they had been ink stick makers who sold their goods to travellers. All in all, our family was successful—we now had a shop in Peking, where Father and his brothers and their sons worked—but not so successful that we caused great envy. The family home, on Pig's Head Lane, had grown from a simple house into a compound, with five-pillar wings, and outbuildings perched above the deepest end of the ravine. The Liu family had once owned twenty *mu* of land, but over the centuries, with each heavy rainfall, the walls of the ravine had collapsed and widened, rumbled and deepened, and the cliff crept closer to the back of our house. We called the ravine the End of the World. What lay below was too unlucky to name out loud: unwanted babies, suicide maidens, and beggar ghosts.

Precious Auntie was born in a town called Mouth of the Mountain, in the foothills on the other side of the ravine. In Mouth of the Mountain, poor men collected dragon bones from the nearby caves and then sold them to medicine shops for high prices, and the shops sold them to sick people for still higher prices. The bones were known to cure anything, from wasting diseases to stupidity. Plenty of doctors sold them. And so did Precious Auntie's father, the Famous Bonesetter in the Mouth of the Mountain. He used bones to heal bones.

Her father's customers were mostly men and boys who had been injured in the coal mines and limestone quarries. The bonesetter had learned his skill from watching his father, and his father had learned from his father before him. That was their inheritance. They also passed along a secret: the location of a cave called the Monkey's Jaw, where many dragon bones could be found.

I can still remember the directions to the Monkey's Jaw. It was between the Mouth of the Mountain and Immortal Heart, far from the other caves in the foothills, where everyone else went to dig up dragon bones. Precious Auntie took me there several times, always in the spring or the autumn. We went down into the End of the World and walked along the middle of the ravine, away from the walls, where the grownups said there were things that were bad to see. Sometimes we passed by a skein of weeds, shards of a bowl, a quagmire of twigs. In my childish mind, those sights became parched flesh, a baby's skull, a soup of maidens' bones.

When we stood in front of the cave itself, a split in the mountain that was no taller than a broom, Precious Auntie pulled aside the dead bushes that hid the entrance. The two of us took big breaths and went in. It was like trying to get inside an ear. By the time I was in the cave, I was crying and Precious Auntie was grunting to reassure me, because I could not see her inkstained fingers to know what she was saying. I had to follow her handclaps, crawling like a dog so I would not hit my head. When we finally reached the larger part of the cave, Precious Auntie lit the candle lamp and hung it on a pole

left by one of her clan long ago.

On the cave's floor, there were digging tools—iron wedges of different sizes, hammers and claws—as well as sacks for dragging out the dirt. The walls of the cave were many layers, like an eight-treasure rice pudding cut in half, with lighter, crumbly things on top, then a thicker, muddy part like bean paste below, growing heavier toward the bottom. After centuries of people's digging, there was an overhang waiting to crash down and bite you in two, which was why the cave was called the Monkey's Jaw.

While we rested, Precious Auntie talked with her inky hands. *Stay away from that side of the monkey's teeth. Once they chomped down on an ancestor, and he was ground up and gobbled down with stones. My father found his skull over there. We put it back right away. Bad luck to separate a man's head from his body.*

Hours later, we climbed back out of the Monkey's Jaw with a sack of dirt and, if we had been lucky, one or two dragon bones. Precious Auntie held them up to the sky and bowed, thanking the gods. The bones from this cave, she believed, were the reason her family had become famous as bonesetters.

Precious Auntie's father was so talented that patients from the five surrounding mountain villages travelled to see him. Skilled and famous though he was, he could not prevent all tragedies. When Precious Auntie was four, her mother and older brothers died of an intestine-draining disease. The bonesetter was so ashamed of being unable to save his own family members that he spent his entire fortune and went into a lifetime of debt to pay for their funerals.

Because of grief, Precious Auntie said with her hands, he spoiled me, let me do whatever a son might do. I learned to read and write, to ask questions, to play riddle games, to write eight-legged essays, to walk alone and admire nature. The old biddies used to warn him that it was dangerous, and they asked why he didn't bind my feet. My father was used to seeing pain of the worst kinds. But with me he was helpless. He couldn't bear to see me cry.

So Precious Auntie freely followed her father around in his study and shop. A customer could point to any jar on the shelves and she could read the name of its contents. By the time she passed into maidenhood, she had heard every kind of scream and curse. She had touched so many bodies, living, dying, and dead, that few families would consider her as a bride for their sons.

One night, as we ate dinner in the Liu compound, with Mother, my younger sister Gao Ling, and the rest of the family, Precious Auntie told me a story with her hands, which only I could understand. *A rich lady came to my father and told him to unbind her feet and mold them into modern ones. She said she wanted to wear high-heeled shoes. "But don't make the new feet too big," she said, "not like a slave girl's or a foreigner's. Make them naturally small like hers." And she pointed to my feet.*

I'd forgotten that Mother and my other aunts were at the dinner table, and I said aloud, "Do bound feet look like white lilies, the way the romantic books say?" Mother, who had bound feet, frowned at me. How could I talk so openly about a woman's most private parts? So Precious Auntie pretended to scold me with her hands for asking such a question, but what she really said was this: *They're usually cramped like flower-twist bread. But if they're dirty and knotty with calluses, they look like rotten ginger roots and smell like the snouts of pigs three days dead.*

In this way, Precious Auntie taught me to be naughty, just like her. She taught me to be curious, just like her. She taught me to be spoiled. And because I was all these things, she could not teach me to be a better daughter, though she tried to.

I remember how she tried. The last week we were together, she did not speak to me. Instead, she wrote and wrote and wrote. Finally she handed me a bundle of pages laced together with cord. *This is my true story, Lu Ling, she told me, and yours as well.* Later, when I read them, this is what I learned.

One late-autumn day, when Precious Auntie was nineteen, her Chinese age, her father had two new patients. The first was a screaming baby from a family that lived in Immortal Heart. The second was my father's youngest brother. We called him Baby Uncle. They would both cause Precious Auntie everlasting sorrow, but in entirely different ways.

The bawling baby was the youngest son of a big-chested man named Chang, a coffin-maker who had grown rich in times of plague. The carved outsides of his coffins were camphor wood. But the insides were cheap pine, painted and lacquered to look and smell like the better wood.

Some of that camphor wood had fallen onto the baby and knocked his shoulder out of its socket. That's why the baby was now howling, Chang's wife reported with a frightened face. Two years before, she had visited the bonesetter's shop because her eye and jaw had been broken by a stone that, she said, must have dropped out of the open sky. Now she was here with her husband, who was slapping the baby's leg, telling him to stop his racket. Precious Auntie shouted at Chang, "First the shoulder, now you want to break his leg as well!" Chang scowled. Precious Auntie rubbed a little bit of medicine inside the baby's cheeks. Soon the baby quieted down, yawned once, and fell asleep. Then the bonesetter snapped the small shoulder into place.

"What's the medicine?" the coffin-maker asked Precious Auntie. She didn't answer.

"Traditional things," the bonesetter said. "A little opium, a few herbs, and a special kind of dragon bone we dig out from the Monkey's Jaw, a secret place only our family knows."

"Special dragon bone, eh?" Chang dipped his finger in the medicine bowl, then dabbed it inside his cheek. He offered some to Precious Auntie, who sniffed in disgust, and then he laughed and gave Precious Auntie a bold look,

as if he owned her and could do whatever he pleased. In those days, a well-to-do husband was always looking for a second wife.

Right after the Changs and their baby left, Baby Uncle limped in. His name was Liu, he said, Liu Hu Sen. He had been on his way from his family's ink shop in Peking to their home in Immortal Heart, when his horse spooked, throwing him, so he decided, "Better take myself right to the Famous Bonesetter in the Mouth of the Mountain." Precious Auntie was in the back room and could see the young ink-maker through a parted curtain. He was a thin man in his early twenties. His face was refined, but he did not act pompous or overly formal, and, while his gown was not that of a rich gentleman, he was well groomed. She heard him joke with her father about his accident: "My mare was so crazy with fright I thought she was going to gallop straight to the underworld with me stuck astride."

When Precious Auntie stepped into the room, she said, "But fate brought you here instead." Baby Uncle fell quiet. When she smiled, he forgot his pain. When she put a dragon-bone poultice on his naked foot, he decided to marry her. That was Precious Auntie's version of how fast their love grew.

The next morning, Baby Uncle came back with three stemfuls of lychees for Precious Auntie, to show his gratitude. He peeled off the shell of one, and she ate the white-fleshed fruit in front of him. The morning was warm for late autumn, they both remarked. He asked if he could recite a poem he had written that morning. "You speak," he said, "the language of shooting stars, more surprising than sunrise, more brilliant than the sun, as brief as sunset. I want to follow your trail to eternity."

Later that week, unbeknownst to each other, both men went to fortune-tellers to find out if there were any bad omens for marriage.

Chang went to a fortune-teller in Immortal Heart, a man who walked about the village with a divining stick. The marriage signs were excellent for a

second wife, this fortune-teller said. See here, Precious Auntie was born in a Rooster year, and Chang was a Snake—nearly the best match possible. The old man said that Precious Auntie also had a lucky number of strokes in her name. And as a bonus, she had a mole in position eleven, near the fatty part of her cheek, indicating that only sweet words fell from her obedient mouth. Chang was so happy to hear this that he gave the fortune-teller a big tip.

Baby Uncle went to a fortune-teller in the Mouth of the Mountain, an old lady with a face more wrinkled than her palm. She saw nothing but calamity. The first sign was the mole on Precious Auntie's face. It was in position twelve, she told Baby Uncle, and it dragged the girl's mouth down, meaning that her life would always bring her sadness. What's more, she was a fire Rooster, and he a wood Horse, and the combination of birth years was inharmonious. The girl would ride his back and peck him apart piece by piece. The fortune-teller confided to Baby Uncle that she knew the girl quite well. She often saw her on market days, walking by herself; the girl did fast calculations in her head and argued with merchants. She was arrogant and headstrong, too educated. Better find another match, the fortune-teller said. This one will lead to disaster.

Baby Uncle gave the fortune-teller more money, to make her think harder. The fortune-teller kept shaking her head. But after Baby Uncle had given her a total of a thousand coppers, the old lady finally had another thought. When the girl smiled, which was often, her mole was in a luckier position, number eleven. The fortune-teller consulted an almanac, matched it to the hour of the girl's birth. Good news. The Hour of the Rabbit was peace-loving. Her inflexibility was just a bluff. And any leftover righteousness could be beaten down with a strong stick. "But don't marry in the Dragon Year. Bad year for a Horse."

The first marriage proposal came from Chang's matchmaker, who went to the bonesetter and related the good omens. The matchmaker boasted of the coffin-maker's standing, as an artisan descended from noted artisans. She

described his house, his rock gardens, his fish ponds, the furniture in his many rooms, how the wood was of the best color, purple like a fresh bruise. As to the matter of a dowry, the coffin-maker was willing to be more than generous. Since the girl was to be a second wife and not a first, couldn't her dowry be a jar of opium and a jar of dragon bones? This was not much, yet it was priceless, and therefore not insulting to the girl.

The bonesetter considered the offer. He was growing old. Where would his daughter go when he died? What man would want her? She was too spirited, too set in her ways. She had no mother to teach her the manners of a wife. True, the coffin-maker was not the bonesetter's first choice for a son-in-law, but he did not want to stand in the way of his daughter's future happiness. So he told Precious Auntie about Chang's generous offer.

Precious Auntie huffed. "The man's a brute," she said. "I'd rather eat worms than be his wife."

The bonesetter had to give Chang's matchmaker an awkward answer. "I'm sorry," he said, "but my daughter cried herself sick, unable to bear the thought of leaving her worthless father." The lie would have been swallowed without disgrace, if only Baby Uncle's offer had not been accepted the following week.

A few days after the betrothal was announced, the coffin-maker went back to the Mouth of the Mountain and surprised Precious Auntie as she was returning from the well. "You think you can insult me, then walk away laughing?"

"Who insulted whom? You asked me to be your concubine, a servant to your wife. I'm not interested in being a slave in a feudal marriage."

As she tried to leave, Chang grabbed her by the neck, pinched it, saying he should break it, then shook her as if he truly might snap off her head like a winter twig. But instead he threw her to the ground, cursing her and her

dead mother's private parts. And he said these words, which she never forgot: "You'll soon be sorry every day of your miserable life."

Precious Auntie did not tell her father or her beloved Baby Uncle what had happened. No sense in worrying them. And why lead her future husband to wonder if Chang had reason to feel insulted? Too many people had said she was too strong, accustomed to having her own way. And perhaps this was true.

A month before the wedding, Baby Uncle came to her room late at night. "I want to hear your voice in the dark," he whispered. "I want to hear the language of shooting stars." She let him into her *kang* and he eagerly began the nuptials. But as Baby Uncle caressed her, a wind blew over her skin and she began to tremble and shake. For the first time, she realized, she was afraid, frightened by unknown joy.

The wedding was supposed to take place in the Liu family compound in Immortal Heart. It was soon after the start of the New Year, a bare spring day. For the journey there from Mouth of the Mountain, Precious Auntie changed her clothes to her bridal costume—a red jacket and skirt, the fancy headdress with a scarf that she had to drape over her face once she left her father's home. For the journey, the bonesetter had procured only the best for his daughter: an enclosed sedan chair for the bride herself, four sedan carriers, two men with carts, a flute player, and two of the strongest bodyguards, with real pistols and gunpowder, to watch out for bandits. In one of the carts was the dowry—the jar of opium and the jar of dragon bones, the last of his supply. He assured his daughter many times that she need not worry about the cost. After her wedding, he could go to the Monkey's Jaw and gather more bones.

Halfway to Immortal Heart, two bandits wearing hoods sprang out of the bushes. "I'm the famous Mongol Bandit!" one of them bellowed. Right away, Precious Auntie recognized the voice of Chang the coffin-maker. What kind

of ridiculous joke was this? But before she could say anything, the guards threw down their pistols, the carriers dropped their poles, and Precious Auntie was thrown to the floor of the sedan and knocked out.

When she came to, Baby Uncle was lifting her out of the sedan. She looked around and saw that the wedding trunks had been ransacked and that the guards and carriers had fled. And then she noticed her father lying in a ditch, his head and neck at an odd angle, the life gone from his face. Was she in a dream? “My father,” she moaned. As she bent over the body, unable to make sense of what had happened, Baby Uncle picked up a pistol that one of the guards had dropped.

“I swear I’ll find the demons who caused my bride so much grief!” he shouted, and then he fired the pistol toward Heaven, startling his horse.

Precious Auntie did not see the kick that killed Baby Uncle, but she heard it—a terrible crack, like the opening of the earth. For the rest of her life she was to hear it in the breaking of twigs, the crackling of fire, whenever a melon was split in two.

That was how Precious Auntie became a widow and an orphan on the same day. Baby Uncle’s family took her into their home in Immortal Heart—how could they not?—until plans for a double funeral could be made. For three sleepless days, Precious Auntie apologized to the corpses of her father and Baby Uncle. She talked to their still faces. She touched their mouths, though this was forbidden.

On the third day, Chang arrived at the Liu family home with two coffins. “He killed them!” Precious Auntie cried when she caught sight of him. She picked up a fire poker and tried to strike him. She beat at the coffins. Baby Uncle’s brothers had to wrestle her away. They apologized to Chang for the girl’s lunacy, and Chang replied that grief of this magnitude was admirable. Because Precious Auntie continued to be wild with admirable grief, the women of the house had to bind her from elbows to knees with strips of

cloth. Then they laid her on Baby Uncle's *kang*, where she wiggled and twisted like a butterfly stuck in its cocoon until Great Granny forced her to drink a bowl of medicine that made her body grow limp. For two days and nights she dreamed she was with Baby Uncle, lying on the *kang* as his bride.

When she revived, she was alone in the dark. Her arms and legs had been unbound, but they were weak. The house was quiet. Weeping, she vowed to join her father and Baby Uncle in the yellow earth. In the ink-making studio, she went looking for a length of rope, a sharp knife, matches she could swallow, anything to cause pain greater than what she already felt. And then she saw a pot of black resin. She lowered a dipper into the liquid and put it in the maw of the stove. The oily ink became a soup of blue flames. She tipped the ladle and swallowed.

Great Granny was the first to hear the thump-bumping sounds, and she hurried to the studio with the other women of the household. They found Precious Auntie thrashing on the floor, hissing air out of a mouth blackened with blood and ink. "Like eels are swimming in the bowl of her mouth," Mother said. "Better if she dies."

But Great Granny did not let this happen. Baby Uncle's ghost had come to her in a dream and warned that if Precious Auntie died, he and his ghost bride would roam the house and seek revenge on those who had not pitied her. Day in and day out, Great Granny dipped cloths into ointments and laid these over Precious Auntie's burns. Over the next few months, the wounds changed from pus to scars. Precious Auntie had once been a fine-looking girl. Now all except blind beggars shuddered at the sight of her. But Great Granny continued to care for Precious Auntie: she bought dragon bones, crushed them, and sprinkled them into her swollen mouth. And eventually she noticed that another part of Precious Auntie had become swollen: her womb.

In the year 1929, my fourteenth year, I read Precious Auntie's story for the

first time. Earlier that same year, the scientists, both Chinese and foreign, came to Dragon Bone Hill, at the Mouth of the Mountain. They wore sun hats and Wellington boots. They brought shovels and poking sticks, sorting pans and fizzing liquids. They dug in the quarries; they burrowed in the caves. They went from medicine shop to medicine shop, buying up all the old bones. Then some of the Chinese workers who dug for the scientists passed along a rumor that two of the dragon bones might have been teeth from a human head. Some people stopped buying dragon bones. Big signs in the medicine shops declared, “None of our remedies contain human parts.”

At the time, Precious Auntie still had four or five dragon bones left from our visits to the cave at the Monkey’s Jaw. Soon after this, her father, the Famous Bonesetter, came to her in a dream. “The bones you have are not from dragons,” he said. “They are from our own clan, an ancestor who was crushed in the Monkey’s Jaw. That’s why nearly everyone in our family has died—your mother, your brother, myself, your future husband—because of this curse. Return the bones, or he’ll continue to plague us.”

The next morning, Precious Auntie rose early to return the dragon bones to the Monkey’s Jaw. When she returned, she seemed more at ease. But then the workmen passed along this news: “The teeth are not only human but belong to a piece of skull from our oldest ancestors, one million years old!” Peking Man was what the scientists decided to call the section of skull. They needed to find just a few more pieces to make a whole skull, and a few more after that to connect his skull to his jaw, his jaw to his neck, his neck to his shoulders, and so on, until he was a complete man. That was why the scientists were asking the villagers to bring all the dragon bones they had lying around their houses and medicine shops. If the dragon bones proved to be from ancient humans, the owner would receive a reward.

I knew where there were human bones, and yet I could say nothing. I had to watch as others gouged the ground where their sheep chewed grass. From the muck, they yanked out roots and worms. They guessed that these might

be ancient men's finger and toes, or even the fossilized tongue that spoke the first words of our ancestors. In a short while, our village looked worse than a burial ground dug up by grave robbers.

Day and night, the family talked of Peking Man and almost nothing else. "Million years?" Mother wondered aloud. "How can anyone know the age of someone who has been dead that long? *Hnh*, when my grandfather died, no one knew if he was sixty-eight or sixty-nine."

I, too, had something to say: "Why are they calling him Peking Man? The teeth came from the Mouth of the Mountain. And now the scientists are saying that skull was a woman's. So it should be called Woman from the Mouth of the Mountain." My aunts and uncles looked at me, and one of them said, "Wisdom from a child's lips, simple yet true." I was embarrassed to hear my words spoken of so highly. Then my sister Gao Ling added, "I think he should be called Immortal Heart Man. Then our town would be famous and so would we." Mother praised her suggestion to the skies, and the others joined in. To my mind, her idea made no sense, but I could not say this.

I was often jealous when Gao Ling received more attention from our mother. I was the elder daughter. I was smarter. I had done better in school. Yet Gao Ling had the honor of sitting next to Mother, of sleeping in her *kang*, while I shared Precious Auntie's room and her *kang*.

When I was younger, that had not bothered me. I felt I was lucky to have my nursemaid by my side. I thought the words "Precious Auntie" were what others meant by "Ma." I could not bear to be separated from Precious Auntie for even one moment. I admired her and was proud that she could write the names of every flower, seed, and bush, as well as explain their medicinal uses. But the bigger I grew, the more she shrank in importance: Precious Auntie was only a servant, a woman who held no great position in our household, a person no one liked.

Often I complained to Precious Auntie that Mother did not love me. *Stop your nonsense*, Precious Auntie would answer. *Didn't you hear her today? She said your sewing was sloppy. And she mentioned your skin was getting too dark. If she didn't love you, why did she bother to criticize you for your own good?* And then Precious Auntie went on to say how selfish I was, always thinking about myself. She criticized me so much that, although I did not realize it then, I now know that she was saying she loved me even more.

One day—this was sometime before Spring Festival—Old Cook came back from the market and said big news was flying through Immortal Heart. We were working in the ink studio as usual, all the women and girls of our family, everyone except Precious Auntie, who was in the root cellar, counting the ink sticks she had already carved. Old Cook went on: Chang the coffin-maker had become famous and was soon to be very rich. Those dragon bones he had given to the scientists? The results had come back: they were human. How old was not certain yet, but everyone guessed they were at least a million years, maybe even two.

“What a peculiar coincidence,” one of my aunts now said. “The same Mr. Chang who sells us wood. His luck could have been ours just as easily.”

“Our association goes back even further than that,” Mother boasted. “He was the man who stopped his cart to help after Baby Uncle was killed by the Mongol bandits. A man of good deeds, that Mr. Chang.”

Precious Auntie came back to the ink studio, and in a short while she realized who was being talked about. She stamped her feet and punched the air. *Chang is evil*, she said, her arms flailing. *He killed my father. He is the reason Baby Uncle is dead. And the bones, those are the ones he stole from my dowry, the bones of our ancestors who died in the Monkey's Jaw.*

That was not true, I thought. Her father had fallen off a cart when he was drunk, and Baby Uncle had been kicked by his own horse. Mother and my aunts had told me so. The Liu family had taken her in because they were too

kind-hearted for their own good.

I remember the day Mother received a surprise letter from Peking. It was the period of Great Heat, when mosquitoes were happiest. Great Granny had been dead for more than ninety days. We sat in the shade of the big tree in the courtyard, waiting to hear the news.

We all knew the letter writer, Old Widow Lau. She was a cousin, within eight degrees of kinship on Father's side and five degrees on Mother's side. She had come to Great Granny's funeral, and had wailed as loudly as the rest of us.

Since Mother could not read, she asked Gao Ling to, and I had to hide my disappointment. Gao Ling smoothed her hair, cleared her throat, and licked her lips. "Dear Cousin," she read, "I send greetings from all those who have asked after you with deep feeling." Gao Ling then stumbled through a long list of names, from those of brand-new babies to people Mother was sure were already dead. On the next page, our old cousin wrote something like this: "I know you are still in mourning and barely able to eat because of grief. So it is not a good time to invite everyone to come visit in Peking. But I have been thinking about what you and I discussed when we last saw each other, and I wish humbly to suggest that your number-one daughter"—she was speaking of me, and my heart swelled—"come to Peking and accidentally meet a distant relation of mine." Gao Ling threw me a scowl, and I was pleased that she was jealous. "This relation," Gao Ling continued, in a less enthusiastic voice, "has four sons who are seventh cousins of mine. They live in your same village, but are barely related to you, if at all."

When I heard the words "barely related," I knew this accidental meeting meant she wanted to see whether I might be a marriage match for a certain family. Most girls my age were already married. As to which family she was speaking of, Old Widow Lau did not want to say, unless she knew for certain that our family believed such a meeting could be beneficial. "To be honest,"

she wrote, "I would not have thought of this family on my own. But the father came to me and asked about Lu Ling. Apparently, they have seen the girl and are impressed with her beauty and sweet nature."

My face flushed. At last, Mother knew what others were saying about me. Perhaps she might finally see these good qualities in me.

"I want to go to Peking, too," Gao Ling said like a complaining cat.

Mother scolded her: "Did anyone invite you? No? Shut your mouth, then." Mother yanked her braid before handing me the letter to finish reading.

I sat up straight, facing Mother, and read with much expression, "The family suggests a meeting at your ink shop in Peking." I stopped a moment and smiled at Gao Ling. I had never seen the shop, nor had she. "In this way," I continued, "if there is any disharmony of interest, there will be no public embarrassment for either family. If both families are in agreement about the match, then this will be a blessing from the gods, for which I can take no credit."

"No credit," Mother said with a snort, "just a lot of gifts."

The next part of the letter went like this: "My daughter-in-law suggested that your daughter's nursemaid should not accompany her to Peking. If a person were to see the two together, he would remember only the shocking ugliness of the nursemaid and not the emerging beauty of the maiden. I told her that was nonsense, and scolded her for being coldhearted. But as I write this letter, I realize now that it would be inconvenient to accommodate another servant, since mine already complain that there is not enough room to sleep in the bed they share. . . ."

Only when I was done reading did I look up at Precious Auntie, embarrassed. *Never mind*, she signed to me. *I'll tell her, later, that I can sleep on the floor*. I turned to Mother, waiting to hear what she had to say.

“Write back. Tell Old Widow Lau that I will have you go in a week. I’d take you myself, but it’s our busiest season and we have too much to do. I’ll ask Mr. Wei to take you in his cart. He always makes a medical delivery to Peking on the first and won’t mind an extra passenger in exchange for a little cash.”

Precious Auntie flapped her hands for my attention. *Now is the time to tell her you can’t go alone. Who will make sure it’s a good marriage? What if that busybody idiot cousin tries to barter you off as a second wife to a poor family? Ask her to consider that.* I shook my head. I was afraid to anger Mother with a lot of unnecessary questions and ruin my chance to visit Peking.

Later, Precious Auntie handed me a letter, which I was supposed to give to Gao Ling so she could read it to Mother. I nodded, and as soon as I was out of the room, I read it: “The summer air in Peking is full of diseases, and there are strange ailments we have never even experienced here, maladies that could make the tips of Lu Ling’s nose and fingers fall off. Luckily, I know the remedies for such problems, so Lu Ling will not return bringing an epidemic with her. . . .” When Precious Auntie asked me if I had given Gao Ling the letter for Mother, I made my face and heart a stone wall. “Yes,” I lied. Precious Auntie sighed, relieved. This was the first time she believed a lie of mine.

The night before I was to leave, Precious Auntie stood before me with the letter, which she had found in a pocket of my jacket. *What is the meaning of this?* She grabbed my arm.

“Leave me alone,” I protested. “You can’t tell me what to do anymore.”

You think you’re so smart? You’re still a silly baby.

“I’m not. I don’t need you now.”

If you had a brain, then you wouldn’t need me.

“You want to keep me here only so you won’t lose your position as nursemaid.”

Her face turned dark, as if she were choking. *Position? You think I am here only for a lowly position as your nursemaid? Ai-ya! Why am I still alive to hear this child say such things?*

Our chests were heaving. And I shouted back what I had often heard Mother and my aunts say: “You’re alive because our family was good and took pity on you and saved your life. We didn’t have to. Baby Uncle never should have tried to marry you. It was bad luck. That’s why he was killed by his own horse. Everyone knows it.”

Her whole body slumped, and I thought she was acknowledging that I was right. At that moment, I pitied her in the same way I pitied beggars I could not look in the eye. I felt I had grown up at last, and she had lost her power over me. It was as if the old me were looking at the new me, admiring how much I had changed.

The next morning, Precious Auntie did not help me with my bundle of clothes. She did not prepare a lunch I could take along. Instead, she sat on the edge of the *kang*, refusing to look at me. Two hours before daybreak, Mr. Wei came by, his donkey loaded with cages of snakes for medicine shops. I tied on a scarf, to keep the sun off my face. As I climbed into the cart next to him, everyone except Precious Auntie was standing at the gate to see me off. Even Gao Ling was there, with her face unwashed. “Bring me back a doll,” she shouted. At thirteen, she was still such a baby.

The day was a long ride of never-ending dust. Whenever the donkey stopped to drink water, Mr. Wei dipped a large rag into the stream and wrapped it around his head to keep himself cool. Soon I was doing the same with my scarf.

In the late afternoon, we approached Peking, and I instantly revived from the effects of the heat and my hunger. When we entered the inspection station, a policeman with a cap poked through my small bundle and looked inside the cages with Mr. Wei's snakes.

"What is your reason for being in Peking?" the policeman asked.

"Delivery of medicine." Mr. Wei nodded to the snake cages.

"Marriage," I answered truthfully, and the policeman turned to another and called out my answer and they both laughed. After that, they let us continue. Soon I saw a tall memorial archway in the distance, its gold letters glinting like the sun. We passed through and entered a roadway as wide as the greatest of rivers. Rickshaws raced by, more than I had seen in a lifetime. I saw men in loose-weave long jackets, others in Western suits. Those men looked more impatient, more important than the men in our village. And there were many girls in floating dresses, wearing hair styles like those of famous actresses, the fringe in front crimped like dried noodles. I heard a crisp crack, saw the freshly opened gut of a more delicious-looking melon than any we could buy in our town.

"If you gawk any more, your head will twist right off," Mr. Wei said. I kept tallying the sights in my head so I could tell everyone all that I had seen. I was imagining their awe, Mother's admiration, Gao Ling's envy. I could also see the disappointment in Precious Auntie's face. So I pushed her out of my mind.

Finally we stood in front of the gate on Lantern Market Street that led into the cramped courtyard of Old Widow Lau's house. Two dogs ran toward me, barking.

"*Ai!* Are you a girl or a yellow-mud statue?" Old Widow Lau said in greeting. Dirt ringed my neck, my hands, every place where my body had a crease or a bend. I stood in a four-walled courtyard compound that was so

chaotic that my arrival attracted almost no notice. Right away, Old Widow Lau handed me a beat-up bucket and told me where the well pump was. As I filled the bucket, I took a sip of the water, but it was brackish, terrible-tasting. No wonder Precious Auntie had told me that Peking was once the wasteland of the bitter sea. Just then, I realized this was the first time she had not been there to help me with my bath. Where was the tub? Where was the stove for warming the water? I was too scared to touch anything. I squatted behind a mat shed and poured cold water over my neck, angry with Precious Auntie for turning me into such a stupid girl.

When I next appeared before Old Widow Lau, she exclaimed, “Is your head just an empty eggshell? Why are you wearing a padded jacket and winter trousers? And what’s the matter with your hair?”

How could I answer? That Precious Auntie had refused to help me prepare for the trip, and that I’d forgotten even a comb?

“What a disaster!” Old Widow Lau muttered. “Pity the family that takes in this stupid girl for a daughter-in-law.” She hurried to her trunks to search among the slim dresses of her youth. At last she settled on a dress borrowed from one of her daughters-in-law, a lightweight *qipao* that was not too old-fashioned. It had a high collar, short sleeves, and was woven in the colors of summer foliage, lilac for the body, and leafy green for the trim and frog clasps. Old Widow Lau then undid my messy braids and dragged a wet comb through my hair.

Lantern Market Street was not far from our family’s ink shop, where the meeting with the interested family was to take place. I soon found myself standing in front of its door, anxious to see Father. Old Widow Lau was paying the rickshaw driver—or rather, arguing with him that he should not charge us so much for an extra passenger, since I was still a small child. “Small child?” the driver said with a snort. “Where are your eyes, old woman?” I stared at the hem of the lilac dress I had borrowed, patted the

neatly knotted bun at the back of my head. I was embarrassed but also proud that the driver thought I was a grownup woman.

The ink shop faced north and was quite dim inside. Father was busy with a customer, and did not see us at first. Big Uncle welcomed us and invited us to be seated. From his formal tone, I knew he did not recognize me. So I called his name in a shy voice. And he squinted at me, then laughed and announced our arrival to Little Uncle, who apologized many times for not rushing over sooner to greet us. They urged us to be seated at one of two tea tables for customers. Little Uncle brought hot tea and sweet oranges.

I tried to notice everything. Along the walls were display cases made of wood and glass, with silk-wrapped boxes inside. Father opened a box, took out an ink stick, set it on top of the glass case, and leaned over it with a customer. The stick had a top shaped like a fairy boat, and my father said, with graceful importance, "Your writing will flow as smoothly as a keel cutting through a glassy lake."

As he said this, Precious Auntie came back into my mind. I was remembering how she'd taught me that everything, even ink, had a purpose and a meaning. You cannot be an artist if your work comes without effort. That is the problem with modern bottled ink. You do not have to think. You simply write what is swimming on the top of your brain, which is nothing but pond scum, dead leaves, and mosquito spawn. But when you push an ink stick along an inkstone, you take the first step to cleansing your mind and your heart. You push and you ask yourself, What are my intentions? What is in my heart that matches my mind?

Just as Old Widow Lau had planned, my prospective mother-in-law accidentally passed by the shop promptly at the scheduled time. The woman was younger than Mother. She had a stern countenance and she wore much gold and jade on her wrists, to show how valuable she was. When Old Widow Lau called to her, she acted puzzled at first, then delighted.

“What luck that we should run into you here,” Old Widow Lau cried in a high voice. “When did you arrive in Peking? . . . Oh, visiting a cousin? How are things back in Immortal Heart?” After we had recovered from our fake surprise, Old Widow Lau introduced the woman to Father and my uncles. I was concentrating so hard on not showing any expression whatsoever that I did not hear her name.

“This is my cousin’s Elder Daughter, Liu Lu Ling,” Old Widow Lau said. “She is visiting Peking this week. The family lives in Immortal Heart village, like yours, but they sell their ink in Peking. And as you can see,” she said, sweeping her hand out to indicate the shop, “their business is not doing too bad.”

“In part, we have your husband to thank,” Father then said. “We buy much of our excellent wood from him.”

“Really?” Old Widow Lau and the woman said at once.

“Burns down to the best resin. And he has also supplied us with coffins on less fortunate occasions, always of the best quality,” Father continued.

So this was the wife of Chang the coffin-maker. As more exclamations of surprise rang out, I realized that Precious Auntie would never allow me to marry into this family. Then I reminded myself that this was not her decision to make.

“We, too, are thinking of starting a business in Peking,” Mrs. Chang said.

“Is that so? Perhaps we can help you in some way,” Father said politely.

As Mrs. Chang paused to consider the excellence of this idea, Father added, “In any case, I’ve been eager to talk to your husband about the dragon bones he contributed to the great scientific discovery of Peking Man.”

Mrs. Chang nodded. “We were astonished that those ugly little bones were

so valuable. Lucky we didn't eat them up as medicine."

Two evenings later, we went to the Changs' cousin's house for a Viewing the Moon party. I wore another borrowed dress. I sat quietly and did not eat much and talked even less. Mr. Chang had come up from Immortal Heart, and he and Father discussed Peking Man.

"All the pieces of the skull must stay in China," Father said. "That is not only proper, it's the agreement with the foreigners."

"Those foreigners," Chang said, "you can't trust them to keep their word. They'll find a way to sneak out some pieces. They'll find excuses, make new treaties, apply pressure."

"No treaty can change the fact that Peking Man is a Chinese man and should stay where he lived and died."

Suddenly Mr. Chang turned toward me. "Maybe one day you and I can collect more bones of Peking Man together. Then we can both be famous. How would you like that?"

I nodded eagerly.

The next day, I was a contented girl as I rode home. I had never felt so important. I had not shamed Old Widow Lau or my family. In fact, I had been a great success. My father had criticized me in small ways about unimportant matters. So I knew he was proud of me. Old Widow Lau had bragged to her daughters-in-law that I had the looks and manners to warrant ten proposals. She was certain I would receive an offer from the Changs within the week.

Though I had yet to meet the Changs' fourth son, who was back in Immortal Heart, I knew he was two years older than I was, and an apprentice in his father's coffin-making business. What's more, there had been talk of his expanding the business, just as our family had done, which

meant I would live in Peking. During all these discussions, I did not ask if my future husband was smart, if he was educated, if he was kind. I did not think about romantic love. I knew nothing of that. But I did know that marriage had to do with whether I improved my station in life or made it worse. And, to judge by the Changs' manners and the jewelry the Chang wife wore, I was about to become a more important person. What could be wrong with that?

Mr. Wei came before dawn to take me back to Immortal Heart. On the way home, I began to dream about all the ways in which I had to change my life. I needed new clothes. And I should be more careful to keep my face out of the sun. I did not want to look like a dark little peasant girl. After all, we were artisans and merchants from an old clan, greatly respected.

Hours later, the cart climbed the last hill that hid Immortal Heart. I could hear the crowing of cocks, the yowling of dogs, all the familiar sounds of our village. As quickly as it takes to snap a twig—that's how fast the mind can turn against what is familiar and dear. There I was, about to arrive at my old home, and I was not filled with sentimental fondness for all I had grown up with. Instead, I noticed the ripe stench of a pig pasture, the pockmarked land dug up by dragon-bone dream-seekers. I saw how the women we passed had the same bland face, with sleepy eyes that were mirrors of their sleepy minds. They were country people, both naïve and practical, slow to change but quick to think that a disturbance of ants on the ground was a sign of bad luck from the gods. Even Precious Auntie seemed, to my mind, a sleepy-headed greasy hat from the country.

But as I pushed open the gate to our house my heart flew back into my chest, and I was filled with a longing to see Precious Auntie. I dashed into the front courtyard: "I'm home! I'm home already!" I went into the ink studio, where I saw Mother and Gao Ling. "Ah, back so soon?" Mother said, not bothering to stop her work. "Cousin Lau sent me a note that the meeting went well, and the Changs will probably take you." Gao Ling wrinkled her nose and

said, “*Cho!* You smell like the hind end of a donkey.”

I went to the room I shared with Precious Auntie. Everything was in its usual place, the quilt folded just so at the bottom of the *kang*. But Precious Auntie was not there. I wandered from room to room, from little courtyard to little courtyard. With each passing moment, I felt more anxious to see her.

And then I heard a pot banging. She was in the root cellar, eager that I should know she was there. I peered down the steep ladder and into the tunnel. She waved, and as she climbed up from the shadows, I saw that she still had the figure of a girl. In the brief moment of seeing only half her face lit by the sun, she was again as beautiful as she had seemed to me when I was a small child. When she emerged from the hole, she put the pot down and stroked my face, then said with her hands, *Have you really come back to me?* She pulled my tangled braid and snorted. *Didn't take your comb? No one to remind you?* With spit on her finger, she rubbed dirt from my cheek.

I pulled away. “I can clean myself,” I said.

She began to make hissing sounds. *Gone one week and now you're so grownup?*

I snapped back: “Of course. After all. I'm about to be a married woman.”

I heard. And not as a concubine but as a wife. That's good. I raised you well, and everyone can see that.

I knew then that Mother had not told her the name of the family. She had to hear it sooner or later. “The family is the Changs,” I said.

She made a choking sound, as if she were drowning. She rocked her head like a clanging bell. And then she told me with slashing hands, *You cannot. I forbid you.*

“It's not for you to decide!” I shouted back.

She slapped me, then pushed me against the wall. I pushed her back and stood tall, draining all expression out of my face, and this surprised her. We stared at each other, breathing hard and fast, until we no longer recognized each other. She dropped onto her knees, pounding her chest over and over, her sign for *useless*.

“I need to go help Mother and Gao Ling,” I said, then turned from her and walked away.

Just as expected, the Changs asked our family if I could join theirs as a daughter-in-law. Mother decided that a few weeks would give her and my aunts enough time to sew quilts and clothes suitable for my new life. After Mother announced this news, she cried for joy. “I’ve done well by you,” she said proudly. “No one can complain.” Gao Ling cried as well. And though I shed some tears, not all of them were for joy. I would leave my family, my home. I would change from a girl to a wife. And no matter how happy I was sure to be, I would still be sad to say goodbye to my old self.

Precious Auntie and I continued to share the same room, the same bed. But she no longer drew my bath or brought me sweet water from the well. She did not help me with my hair or worry over my daily health and the cleanliness of my fingernails. We slept at the farthest ends of the *kang*. And if I found myself huddled next to her familiar form, I quietly moved away before she awoke. Every morning she had red eyes, so I knew she had been crying. Sometimes my eyes were red, too.

A few days before I was supposed to leave to join the Changs, I awoke to find Precious Auntie sitting up, staring at me. She raised her hands and began to talk. *Now I will show you the truth*. She went to the small wooden cupboard and removed a package wrapped in blue cloth. She put this in my lap. Inside was a thick wad of pages, threaded together with string. She stared at me with an odd expression, then left the room.

I looked at the first page. "I was born the daughter of the Famous Bonesetter from the Mouth of the Mountain," it began. I glanced through the next few pages. And then I saw where it said, "Now I will tell you how bad this man Chang really is." I threw the pages down. I did not want Precious Auntie poisoning my mind anymore. So I did not read to the end; I did not get to the part where she said she was my mother.

During our evening meal, Precious Auntie acted as if I were once again helpless. She pinched pieces of food with her chopsticks and added these to my bowl. *Eat more*, she ordered. *Why aren't you eating? Are you ill? You seem warm. Your forehead is hot. Why are you so pale?*

After dinner, we all drifted to the courtyard as usual. Mother and my aunts were embroidering my bridal clothes. Precious Auntie was repairing a hole in my old trousers. She put down the needle and tugged my sleeve. *Did you already read what I wrote?*

I nodded, not wishing to argue in front of the others. My cousins, Gao Ling, and I played weaving games with strings looped around our fingers, and the evening wore on. All too soon it was time for bed. I waited for Precious Auntie to go first. After a long while, when I thought she might already be asleep, I went into the dark room.

Immediately Precious Auntie sat up and was talking to me with her hands.

"I can't see what you're saying," I said. And when she went to light the kerosene lamp, I protested, "Don't bother, I'm sleepy. I don't want to talk right now." She lit the lamp anyway. I went to the *kang* and lay down. She followed me and set the lamp on the ledge, crouched, and stared at me with a glowing face. *Now that you have read my story, what do you feel toward me? Be honest.*

I grunted. And that little grunt was enough for her to clasp her hands, then bow and praise the Goddess of Mercy for saving me from the Changs.

Before she could give too many thanks, I added, "I'm still going."

For a long time, she did not move. Then she began to cry and beat her chest. Her hands moved fast: *Don't you have feelings for who I am?*

And I remember exactly what I said to her: "Even if the whole Chang family were murderers and thieves, I would join them just to get away from you."

She slapped her palms against the wall. And then she finally blew out the lamp and left the room.

In the morning, she was gone. But I was not worried. A few times in the past when she had become angry with me she had left like this, but she'd always come back. Let her be angry, then, I said to myself. She doesn't care about my future happiness. Only Mother does. That is the difference between a nursemaid and a mother.

These were my very thoughts as my aunts, Gao Ling, and I followed Mother to the ink-making studio to begin our work. As we entered the dim room, we saw a mess. There were stains on the walls. Stains on the bench. Long spills along the floor. Had a wild animal broken in? And what was that rotten, sweet smell? Then Mother began to wail. "She's dead! She's dead!" In the next moment, I saw Precious Auntie, the top half of her face limestone white, her eyes wild and staring at me. She was sitting propped up against the far wall.

"Who's dead?" I called to Precious Auntie. "What happened?" I walked toward her. Her hair was unbound and matted, and then I saw that her neck was clotted with flies. Her eyes followed me as I moved toward her, but her hands did not move. One held a knife that was used to carve ink sticks. Before I could reach her, a cousin pushed me aside so she could better gawk.

Of that day, this is all I remember. I didn't know how I came to be in my room, lying on the *kang*. When I woke up again, it was morning and Gao

Ling was sitting on the edge of my *kang*. “No matter what,” she said with a tearful face, “I promise to always treat you like a sister.” Then she told me what had happened.

The day before, Mrs. Chang had come over. She was clutching a letter from Precious Auntie. It had arrived in the middle of the night. “What is the meaning of this?” the Chang woman wanted to know. The letter said that if I joined the Chang household, Precious Auntie would come to stay as a live-in ghost, haunting them forever. “Where is the woman who sent this?” Mrs. Chang demanded. And when Mother told her that the nursemaid who’d written it had just killed herself, Mrs. Chang was terrified. She left scared out of her wits.

After that, Mother rushed over to the body, Gao Ling said. Precious Auntie was still propped up against the wall. “This is how you repay me?” Mother cried. “I treated you like a sister. I treated your daughter like my own.” And she kicked the body, again and again, for not saying *thank you, sorry, I beg your pardon a thousand times*. “Mother was crazy with anger,” Gao Ling said. “She told Precious Auntie’s body, ‘If you haunt us, I’ll sell Lu Ling as a whore.’” After that, Mother ordered Old Cook to put the body in a pushcart and throw it over the cliff. “She’s down there,” Gao Ling said. “Your Precious Auntie is lying in the End of the World.”

When Gao Ling left, I still did not understand everything she had said, and yet I knew. I found the pages Precious Auntie had written for me. I finished reading them. At last, I read her words. *Your mother, your mother, I am your mother*.

That day, I went to the End of the World to look for her. As I slid down, branches and thorns tore at my skin. When I reached the bottom, I was feverish to find her. I heard the drumming of cicadas, the beating of vulture wings. I walked toward the thick brush, to where trees grew sideways just as they had fallen with the crumbling cliff. I saw moss, or was that her hair? I

saw a nest high in the branches, or was that her body stuck on a limb? I came to a wasteland with rocky mounds, ten thousand pieces of her skull and bones. Everywhere I looked, it was as if I were seeing her, torn and smashed. I had done this. I was remembering the curse of her family, my family, the dragon bones that had not been returned to their burial place. Chang, that terrible man, wanted me to marry his son only so I would tell him where to find more of the dragon bones. How could I be so stupid as not to have realized this before?

I searched for her until dusk. By then, my eyes were swollen with dust and tears. I never found her. And as I climbed back up, I was a girl who had lost part of herself in the End of the World.

For five days I could not move. I could not eat. I could not cry. I lay in the lonely *kang* and felt the air leaving my chest. When I thought I had nothing left, my body still continued to be sucked empty. On the sixth day, I began to cry and did not stop, from morning until night. When I had no more feeling, I rose from my bed and went back to my life. I thought about what Precious Auntie had written, what she must have been thinking as she pushed the ink stick along the inkstone. She was taking the first step to clearing her mind and her heart. She pushed and pushed, asking herself, “What are my intentions? What is in my heart that will trickle into my daughter’s foolish mind?”

I am your mother, she wrote. I read these words after she died. Yet I have a memory of her telling me with her hands. I can see her telling me with her eyes. When it is dark, she says this to me in a clear voice I have never heard. She speaks in the language of shooting stars. ♦

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