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Shanghai slept early in those days, already settling down at eight o'clock, the blue-green evening sky clearing as the sediments of darkness and hubbub slowly sank to the bottom. Electric lights were as yet uncommon in the Old City. The pebble-paved side street was almost pitch-dark with all the little shops boarded up for the night. The man had it entirely to himself. He weaved happily from one side of the street to the other, humming Peking opera with an occasional 'Ti guh lung di dung' to simulate the musical accompaniment. For coolness he had his pigtail piled on top of his head and his shirt open all the way down baring the chest. He fanned himself noisily in the back under the shirt with a palm-leaf fan.

He passed a shop where the large peep-hole was kept open to let in some air. There were voices inside but all one could see was a palm-leaf fan busily waving in the yellow lamp-lit square. It made him dizzy watching it. He walked on keeping close to the wall for support. There in the darkness he suddenly felt something cool and long slither down his back with a kind of swimming motion. He leaped high into the air and jumped again trying to shake it off. He turned around thinking that he would brush it off with his fan. It was only his pigtail that had come loose.

'Lay its mother!' he swore half laughing. To cover up his confusion in front of invisible spectators he flapped his fan loudly against his buttocks and swung into the slow measured 'square step', walking with feet wide apart, toes pointing outwards in the manner of mandarins in Peking opera, and sang,

'I, the king, drunk in the Peach Blossom Palace,
With Han Su-ngo of beauty matchless.'

That reminded him. Turning around he looked about him and retraced his steps peering at all the familiar shopfronts until he came to the right one. He pounded loudly on the boards and shouted, 'Miss! Miss!'

'Who is it?' a man called out from upstairs. 'What for?'

'Miss! Miss I buy sesame oil,' he called out.

'We're closed, come tomorrow,' the girl snapped.

'Old customer, Miss!'

He kept pounding the boards. She finally came downstairs grumbling. Through the chinks between the boards he could see the light grow as she carried the lamp into the room. The wooden shutter over the peep-hole was pushed up with a clatter and he smelled a whiff of the pungent sticky juice of wood shavings that women put on their hair. Her face appeared and pulled back at once. The lamp shining up from under the chin had made the lips stand out bright pink and sculpted. It looked unreal at this close range looming out of a hole in the darkness and disappearing. But he knew it so well, the neat gold mask, a short face on top of the long neck and sloping shoulders. Bangs cut into a pointed arch swept down wing-like over wide cheeks, joined with the wisp in front of the ears that was plastered down to shape the face. A small purplish red mark stood like a spindle between the brows where she had pinched herself over and over again to pinch the heat sickness out of the system. She probably knew it was becoming as she was seldom without it all through summer.

'Hurry, pass me the bottle.' She stuck a hand out and he seized it.

‘Let’s hold hands,’ he giggled. ‘Let’s hold hands, Miss.’

‘Dead man,’ she screamed, ‘die from a thousand sword cuts!’

He giggled muttering to himself with quiet satisfaction, ‘Sesame Oil Beauty’. They called her that in the neighbourhood.

She twisted her wrist about, knocking the silver-trimmed black rattan bangle on the edges of the peephole. He tried to pull out the trailing silk handkerchief tucked in the bracelet, which fitted so tightly he had trouble getting it out. She jerked back but his other hand held on.

‘Take pity on me, Miss,’ he whispered. ‘I die from thinking of you, Miss.’

‘Will you let go or not, dead man?’ She stamped her feet and brought the flame of the lamp to his hand. The blackened dish of oil stood on a tall unpainted wooden stand. He almost upset it snatching his hand away.

‘Ai-yo, ai-yo,’ he cried. ‘Miss, how can you be so cruel?’

‘What’s all this yelling?’ her brother shouted from upstairs.

‘The dead man grabbed my hand. Rotten corpse afloat! Corpse on the roadside. What do you take me for? Open your eyes and look, dead man.’

Her brother’s wife poked her head out of the window. ‘Gone. Who was it?’

‘Who else but that dead carpenter? It would be my luck to run into a ghost today. Pig. Tramp, why don’t you go and pass water and look into the puddle, see your ugly face.’

‘All right now,’ her brother called out, ‘after all we’re neighbours.’

‘That’s just it,’ she shouted back, ‘doesn’t it embarrass him to come and make a row in the middle of the night

as if he doesn't know what sort of people we are? Next time he comes see if I don't hit him with the bolt. This time the tramp got off lightly. Born without eyes, dead man? May your mother be laid. Lay your ancestors eight generations back.'

She had got into the spirit of it. Her voice carried down the block. At last her brother spoke up again, 'All right, all right, don't yell, as if you're afraid people don't know. It's nothing that will give us face.'

'You want face?' she turned on him. 'You want face? You think people don't know what you do behind my back? Can you wonder people look down on me?'

'Still yelling. How is it a young girl has no shame?' Bingfa had already lowered his voice but Yindi raised hers another notch. The very mention of their quarrel had brought up all her anger.

'And you have shame? You've lost all of Father and Mother's face. So I'm shouting—if I didn't make enough of a row you'd have sold your own sister even. If I had known I'd never have shown myself. I felt so cheap and all your doing and you call me shameless?'

Bingfa leaned forward so suddenly his bare back sucked at the wicker chair with a light smack. But he was washing his feet, standing his long legs in a red-painted wooden basin with three feet.

'All right, all right,' his wife said, 'let her. After all a girl is a guest in the house. She'll soon be married and gone.' She dropped her voice. 'Marry her off quick. As the old saying goes, "A grown daughter is not worth keeping. Keep her, keep her and she turns into an enemy." And the way people talk, they'd say we want her to sit at the counter and draw crowds. A living signboard.'

He did not say anything as he wiped his feet with a shredded towel, grey with use.

‘I tell you I’m really worried. There’s bound to be trouble one of these days with all these men hanging around.’

He was alarmed. ‘Why, have you noticed anything?’

‘Well, like tonight. I have no time to keep an eye on her, so many children to take care of, otherwise I’d watch the shop myself, less worries all round.’

‘Actually she would have done all right if she’d been given to the Wongs. They’ve just opened a branch at the Bridge of the Eight Immortals.’ He jerked his head slightly in that direction.

‘It’s your fault really, it’s for you to decide, how can you let her pick and choose? Without parents it’s you the brother who gets the blame if she’s not married. Next time you just have to be firm.’

He fell silent again. He would just as soon let it slide from year to year, there never was enough money for the trousseau, as if she didn’t know. She looked at him. So did the red goose, all neck, which served as a handle to the basin. Carved in the flat on both sides, the profile reared up tall and straight in front of him fixing him with a concentric eye. He stepped into his cloth shoes, heels trodden down to make do as slippers. Feet planted far apart he turned away and spat. As if she had got her answer she picked up the basin by its neck and clumped downstairs on her bound feet to empty the water on the street outside.

She met Yindi coming up. Without a word Yindi backed down to let her pass on the narrow stairs. The little frame house was giving out all the heat absorbed during the day in fiery puffs. Yindi went back to her stifling room with a headache. She pushed back her wet bangs and opened her high collar, highest in front just under the cheekbones for a hollow-cheeked effect, with a

broad black trimming greasy and frayed around the edges. The side-fastened over-blouse came down to the knees, as tight as the trousers of the same blue glass cloth, all wrinkled. She felt under the pillow for a copper coin. Dipping it in a bowl of water she sat down in front of the mirror and scraped her neck with it, to scratch out the heat sickness. The square hole in the middle of the large coin gave her a nice grip. She scraped hard in long expert strokes, dipping it back in water from time to time. Three wide stripes of mottled purple and red appeared running alongside the throat. The bruised skin burned but she felt slightly eased around the heart. The nape of the neck should also be scraped but she could not do that herself and would not want to ask her sister-in-law.

The matchmaker was a friend of her sister-in-law's, an Aunt Wu. Bingfa's wife got to know her from clubbing together to raise funds once a month, each taking the pot in turn. Aunt Wu was good at getting people to join. She also sold lotteries, peddled enamelled trinkets and embroidered trimmings to rich families she knew, and made matches and delivered babies on the side. She had once worked as a maid. She got the Chais some business. A lady praying for a sick child had promised the god twenty catties of sesame oil a month for the eternal lamp. She had arranged for Bingfa to send the oil to the temple every month, as he still did in two jars slung from a shoulder pole.

This time she came to see Bingfa's wife one night and turned up again a couple of days later with two women in dark clothes with a northern accent. Yindi had thought it was strange the way they stared at her as they filed past the counter. Bingfa's wife gave them tea inside the shop but they did not stay long. When they were leaving she insisted on getting rickshas for them and called out

to Yindi, 'Give me some change.' Yindi had no choice but to get money from the cash-box and come out from behind the counter. Everybody was standing in the street protesting. In the act of pushing back the money one of the women held her hands and looked at them, turning them over.

'Here, be careful, Miss, don't step into the puddle.' Aunt Wu bent down and lifted her trouser legs a little showing the feet.

She didn't like it. According to Bingfa's wife these were amahs of the lady who donated the oil to the temple. Aunt Wu had happened to bring them along. But Aunt Wu came again. Afterwards her brother's wife spoke to her for the first time about the blind son of a high mandarin's family. They were going to get him a concubine because of the difficulty of making a suitable match for him, so this one would be just like a wife. She realized that those two women must have been trusted amahs of the Yaos sent here to look her over, carefully inspecting her hands and feet as people did in shopping for concubines to see if there was skin disease and if the bound feet were small and well-shaped. She quarrelled with Bingfa and his wife for subjecting her to this. People were sure to think that she had been examined with her consent. When nothing came of it it would seem as if she did not pass the test.

It was true that her brother and sister-in-law had never thought of making money out of her before. She was the goods you lose money on, what they call daughters. At least concubines did not have to bring a trousseau. Even now it seemed to her that they did not think of her as a source of wealth but rather as an obstacle to their coming into a small fortune. Her position at home was getting to be impossible.

The men in the neighbourhood talked and joked about her behind her back but when they actually came face to face with her they seldom had anything to say. Sometimes they were bold like this carpenter who made trouble tonight. He would lean across the counter with a slight smile staring at her with eyes like two wet mouths. Filling his bottle she would set it down with a bang.

‘Twenty coins.’

‘Tch, tch! Why so fierce?’

Gazing into the air, her golden face impassive with the red mark between the brows, she suddenly spat out the words ‘Dead man!’ and turned her head aside giggling.

He went away vastly tickled.

This kind of thing would get her nothing but a bad name. She was already known as a flirt which was perhaps why matchmakers did not wear out her doorstep as one might expect, being called the Sesame Oil Beauty. Eighteen and not even engaged. With her own brother and sister-in-law plotting against her she felt like a fugitive carrying a jewel that endangered his life and was not marketable.

Tiny green insects flew around the lamp in droves, falling dead on the table with a dry rustle. Perhaps it would be cooler if she blew out the lamp. She sat in the dark fanning herself. Men are all alike. There was one who seemed a bit different though, Young Liu at the pharmacy across the street, tall, pale and as pretty as a girl in his long dark gown, not a speck of dust on his white cloth socks. It was a wonder how well-groomed he was, living in the shop with nobody to look after his things. She had often caught him looking across at her. Actually if he was not so timid he could have contrived to pay the Chais an occasional visit since he came from the same village as her mother on the outskirts of Shanghai.

Her maternal grandparents were still alive. When they came for visits they often dropped in at the pharmacy to bring him some message. He seldom had a chance to go home.

She went with her brother's family to see her grandparents during the New Year. They should have gone on the first of the first moon or the second or third at the latest, the days reserved for close relatives. But her grandparents were poor and partly dependent on Bingfa, so they did not have time for them until the fifth. They spent the afternoon at the village. Her grandmother mentioned that Young Liu was back for the New Year but had already returned to the shop. While she had not exactly expected to meet him there it disappointed her all the same. She felt bitter about her brother and his wife putting off the visit until the fifth. They are so snobbish, she said to herself. She made it out as if she was purely indignant on her grandparents' behalf. It would not be like this if Mother was alive, she thought and tears welled up in her eyes.

She had always liked the smell of a pharmacy, the acrid sweetness of preserved herbs chilled in the stone-paved large dark interiors. She went to buy medicine for her sister-in-law during her last confinement. Young Liu came forward with a smile and nod as if they had met and waited on her with lowered eyes, not saying much. She liked to watch him turn to the rows of little black drawers with set-in brass rings curled like a stylized cloud. He pulled them out one after the other, the householder in some fantastic home. The tiny scales stick and brass weights were like toys. When she got home she found wrapped with the other herbs a big package of dried white chrysanthemums that was not in the prescription. Several of these flowers soaked in a cup of hot water make a cooling summer drink. She was not too fond of the grassy

fragrance but she enjoyed making it every day watching the small white chrysanthemums plump out under water. She never had a chance to thank him. He would not want others to know that he had made free with the shop's goods.

That was all there was to it. She got up from her chair and stood at the window. A small illumined red square on the door differentiated the pharmacy from the other stores. They had kept their peep-hole open with a piece of red paper pasted over it and an oil lamp behind, illuminating the written words, *In emergency cases please enter by back door.* Somehow as she looked at the clear red square that would be kept aglow throughout the night, a vague sadness came over her that quieted the heart.