

A Kindness

We were the first on our block to get a television. At night, all the neighbor's children would line up by our window and look through the glass. My sister hated it. She used to complain that their eyes were like mosquitoes stinging our backs. I'd join in, scratching at imaginary bites and making faces at our parents, begging them to close the curtains. My mother never did, she just shooed us away and turned the volume louder.

I used to imagine our house was like the honeycombed beehives I learned about in school—the fluorescent light from our television casting out amber waves to bring in swarms of laughing children. Their parents watched too, but quietly from porches or behind windows. Sometimes we all saw a black and white movie, Chinese girls in their pigtails and shapeless rompers running through rice fields.

Mostly we listened to news reports. I used to look up at the Chairman, his face large and shiny, and wonder if his wife ever waited for him at night when she sat alone at the dinner table and he talked to the world. A year later, when the Chairman's friends tore through our house and stole the television, I decided she probably hadn't missed him at all.

I remember the light that night, how it was dark and pulsing as if to scare away touch, as if to warn us that in the morning, we would wake up in dirt hovels thousands of miles apart. The room had been hushed, my father leaning back in his chair to read a newspaper and my mother braiding my hair with factory-trained agility. We heard footsteps in the distance, and then glass crashing like thunder breaking a hot summer afternoon. My mother told us to run and hide, but our house was too small and too square. We ran to the corner as the door was shoved open. A man threw papers at our feet and as

I strained to read the bright red markings I noticed the neighbors at our window. They were pointing and laughing.

“Look where that television got them” they whispered into their children’s ears, “see how the boastful always get punished.”

My father, dragged out of our slope roofed home was punished severely. They tied a placard to his neck and poured ink all over him, all the while screaming into the dark streets, “mind polluter, capitalist lackey: eat the filth you teach your students.”

I fainted. My sister told me years later that I was lucky then, that I had not seen our mother with spit on her face or my father with eyes downcast and back bent. She told me that my weakness gave me courage, that if I seen the men with their faces still as stone, I would never have been brave again.

When I wake up later I am on a thin cot, a camouflage blanket covering my feet. I reach for my father.

“Where’s mom and Meng?” I ask. He blinks to adjust to the hard darkness around us and turns his head away.

“They were taken somewhere else, Lulu.”

I imagine my sister and mother in a room as small as ours and I want to turn my face into a wall and cry. “When are we going to go home?”

There is silence for a while, then a sigh. “Go to bed and sleep, that’s where you’ll find home.”

My parents should have known. They should have known the minute they saw the Chairman with his vicious words and slicing gestures. My mother, with her small job at

the button factory, should have seen the danger in a husband who loved words, who couldn't burn the books when everyone else's homes reeked of cinder.

My parents had too much pride. They laughed at their scared friends, smiling at each other because they thought no one could blame the Lings for loving history or appreciating literature. When my sister was born they named her after the book my father was reading when he met my mother. How could the government, they wondered, destroy objects that had brought so much joy into our home? They should have known then. *Hong Luo Meng* is China's most famous tragedy.

In the morning I am woken by the rough hands of a large peasant woman. She throws clothes at me and picks at a scab on her arm as I put them on. The shirt is large and coarse, the pants end at my ankles.

"Where's my father?" The woman scowls at me and spits on the ground.

"He woke up early to go to the fields," she answers, "you're lucky you're too young. The gardens need weeding, go there first and they'll tell you what to do."

The gardens are larger than I have ever seen, deep brown fields that stretch into the mountains. I am assigned the fifteenth row, and the man on duty teaches me how to put my thumb on the spot where the leaves meet the root and pull as hard as I can. I have never done more than plant a flower, and the weeds are hard and deep. By the afternoon my hands are blistering and my skin is dyed red from the sun, and the man takes pity on me.

"Go home," he says to me quietly, "I'll give this to someone else. You're too young for this anyways."

It is then that I begin to learn kindness, that it is small and contradictory, that you need not be wholly good or bad to dispense it. I nod and run back to the barn that was now my home. I think that if I had come here with my family on vacation, I would have loved the lush green mountains that surround the camp and the small lake I see behind the trees.

The room is empty. I notice the dirt floors and straw sticking out from walls. I realize that my father will not receive the same kindness, that he is old and sturdy and won't be back until dark. I realize I am alone for the first time and run out the door, following a path to the lake and ducking by peasant leaders. They do not reprimand me for my idleness; I am one of the many nameless faces, soft and pale against the rugged fields. I sit by the water and think again that my sister would have loved it here, that we would have picnicked by the stream and listened to my parents talk about how Hong Le Meng meant "dream of red chamber" and wasn't that beautiful and simple and good.

At night my father wordlessly drops onto his bed. I notice his hands are bleeding and try to wash his cuts with the water from the outside pump and a dirty rag. I have only seen my mother do it once before, when I fell down the stairs and hit my knee. My father, though, does not cry or scream. He is silent, staring at the dirt-packed ceiling, and I wonder if he is thinking about my mother, about how when they first met he noticed her hands were hard and calloused and all he could do to stop himself from kissing them was to finish reading his book.

The next day the peasant woman wakes me up again. This time she does not speak, she only nods and grunts towards the fields. The same man is there again, but he is

with a dog. He hands me the leash and tells me to take care of the animal, to train the dog so she can catch the rats that burrow into grains and guard the rice from thieves.

“Her name is Lili,” he tells me, “I’ve cleared it with the men up top and she’s your duty now.”

I am thankful, I miss my sister and the dog will have to do. My father is upset. He cannot understand why they gave her to me. He thinks it is another test, that we have been marked as even blacker traitors. He sighs and tells me to be careful, to do exactly what the men say to do and never let the dog out of my sight. Finally, he becomes hopeful, maybe if I take good care of the dog we can leave earlier. He has heard, I know, of the men who throw their friends to the guards, who trade stories of secret meetings and loyalties to the men in the offices who will nod and smile and mark a check by names. He has heard of the lists with the stamps of good behavior, how if they put one by your number, you will leave in covered trucks the next morning.

“This dog,” he says to me that night, “this dog will lead us to the gate.”

I do not tell him otherwise, but I know that the dog was a kindness only for me, that the man is not powerful enough and the dog not important enough.

Still, I love the dog as if she is my own. I sneak her bits of my porridge and brush her fur with my hands. She is red and golden and I imagine her to be a dragon in hiding. She is waiting, I tell myself, to be free of this place and then she will spin and spin until scales grow out from under her fur. Her mouth will stretch big and cave-like, she will grow wings, and I will leap on her back and we will fly back home.

The two of us spend the days by stacks of rice bags. I train her to growl at people who come too close and reward her when she pounces on rats. The peasants call me the

Girl with the Dog, and then the peasant children shorten it to Girl Dog. I am glad for Lili. She is large and fearsome, and when she is by my side the other children cannot harm me. When I bring her back to my father he looked at her paws and sighed.

Through the winter months she grows to fit her large, ungainly feet. The river has frozen so when I am not guarding the rice bags, we slide on the mirrored surface. I try to tell her stories, but they are boring and lack excitement, so I begin to steal from books. Lili lies on the ice and I curl up by her side. She is hot against my skin and I have been taught to ignore the cold.

“I do not need bourgeoisie warmth,” I am told to say every night before my frozen bed. “I have the Chairman’s red sun in my heart.”

During our days on the lake I close my eyes and imagine I am in the sun. It is brilliantly lit with golds and reds, and my hands burn from touching the sparks. Lili is content by my side. I wonder if she is imagining the sun, how large and round it is against the cloudy sky. I tell her about *Hong Luo Meng*, that in heaven there was a stone that could speak and think like any person and next to it grew a crimson flower. That one day this stone and flower were brought onto the Earth and the stone turned into a handsome prince and the flower into his beautiful sickly cousin. I tell Lili that this prince and his cousin loved each other very much, but he was already promised to another. When he married the other girl, the crimson flowered cousin wilted in grief.

I do not know the story well. It is only a small part in an entire volume that filled the top shelf in my father’s study. The tragedy, I know, is one of the many that dot the *Hong Luo Meng*’s chapters like rain drops, that the story is really about this stone prince’s family, how their power rises and falls like the ripples of a pond and that in the

end all their gold crumbles into dust. But I do not tell Lili this, I do not tell her because I look around at the green mountains and clear lake and I cannot tell her that *Hong Luo Meng* is a mirror of our world, that in the end everything will fall and wilt.

The nights and days grow longer. I turn one year older and no one remembers. I think about how my mother used to bring me back buttons from the factory, one for each year I am alive, and how my sister would help me pick out the fabric my mother would stitch them too. I remember our laughter, how we'd imagine me in a coat with seventy buttons and I wonder where they are now, if Meng has her own dog to play with.

The camp begins to turn green again; the air breathes thick with honey and sun. My father's eyes turn red and he cannot stop sneezing. The peasants tell him he is weak, that if he has the Chairman in his heart, his body will be strong. He is giving up. I know it from the way he moves as if his skin were made of egg shells. At night he eyes the dog and I can tell he is thinking that she is hard and strong like the countryside and he is not.

I try to tell him about Lili, about how she scares away thieves. About how I fell asleep on a bag of grains and she'd woken me up with her howling so that a man could steal the rice. About how when I opened my eyes he was just an empty-handed shadow fleeing into the corner.

I tell him the man on duty at the fields comes and checks on Lili, measures her growth with the span of his hands and praises me for my hard work. I show him the pin the man gave me, and I finger the curved-red edge and the golden profile on its face. I wonder at how the Chairman on television, with his yellowing teeth and thinning hair, looks nothing like his portrait. But I never say anything. I know that the Chairman is

second to nothing and I have seen the smashed faces of Buddha in neighborhood trashcans.

During our afternoons, Lili and I still run to the lake. She knows the way now, leading ahead with her nose pressed against the cool earth. Her fur has bleached in the sun, tawny in the afternoon light. When we lie side by side I curl my fingers into her back, pretending her skin is made of stringed gold. Most of the time, I sit by myself while she runs through the trees. I lean against a stone and spread my hair out. During the day I wear a braid thick as bread, and when it's loose I can imagine my sister running her hands through it.

“Little sister,” she'd say, pinching my arms, “you're almost as tall as me.”

I think of my father, how one night I told him I could not suffer any longer, that the camp was a snake wrapping around my neck. How he turned the lights off and put me to bed, telling me about a peasant woman whose husband was a spy for the Great Revolution, who stole numbers and words and was not very careful and so the soldiers came for him one night. How the woman pushed him out the back door and faced the Germans herself, and they hit her with such force that she could only see in black and white, that her world was a television screen. How when she opened her eyes for a final time the static cleared and the sky was a rainbow, whose colors gave her hope and eased her pain like a warm bath.

After my father finished his story he sighed and turned to the wall so I could not see the tears roll down his face or his hands hit the air as if to push away the darkness.

The forest is silent, the sky bruising a deep purple. As I lean back and close my eyes, a shot breaks the quiet like a shattering mirror.

I jump up from my sitting stone and call for Lili, listening for her feet against the forest floor and her breath pooling through the air. I call for her and find the woods silent and an emptiness aching in my arms.

I turn and run home to find my father waiting by the door. He smiles and grabs my shoulders but I push him away, looking for Lili and hoping she has crawled under my bed or fallen asleep in a corner.

“Lulu,” he says and I notice his face is flushed red, “Lulu” he says again and I hear the shaking in his voice and stop myself from checking under his bed.

“Lulu we are going home.”

I am to pack my things by the morning, but as I sit on my bed with a knapsack my father gave me I realize there is nothing to bring. Instead, I walk around the camp searching for Lili. I run into the man from the fields and he stops me.

“Heard you’re leaving, it’s back to the city for the Girl with the Dog.” I nod politely and he rubs his forehead and looks down at the ground.

“Sorry about your dog, though. In the spring it’s hard to tell dogs from deer.” He gives me a piece of candy and walks away, his shadow long on the ground.

Years later I will learn how peasants used fur to pad mattresses and line pants, how dog hair was the most expensive of materials. I will silently thank the man again, for letting me imagine the peasants weeping over Lili and their mistake

The camp ground is silent in the early morning, the sun rising slowly in the sky like molasses dripping from a spoon. We board the truck and I notice several cars lined up against the dirt road. My father and I are not the only lucky ones. This time I am wide awake, watching the mountains disappear behind us and the small buildings that rise in

their place. We reach a station, small shackled and rusty. I am surprised by train that climbs its way to a stop and even more surprised when we board. For the first time in a long while my father is grinning, bouncing back and forth on his heels as if the Earth is burning. He points out the villages as we pass them, but all I can see are brown and grey roofs reflected off the dusty glass.

I do not ask him why we have left. I understand it as part of the world's kindness, that they have balanced my sadness with a gift. When we step off the train and onto the platform my father gives a cry and I see my mother and sister. They are standing in the crowd, their hair tied back and their faces dark from sun. I am pulled into their arms and I realize my mother's dress hangs on her slender frame and my sister's hands are dry and cracked.

"Lulu, you've grown so much, have they been feeding you magic?" my sister asks.

I shake my head and notice that her face is as thin like a slice of melon. I know that she was not given the same kindness as I was. Still, I reach out for her like I used to for Lili, and close my eyes; smell the dirt on Meng's skin and remember the camp and soon, remember nothing else.