PART ONE

Autumn Begins

THE SIXTH YEAR OF
THE GUANGXU REIGN

1881

Suzhou

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I

THE DAY

Lao Mangzi

It is the Hour of the Snake, a time of day when the sun works hard to warm the earth. The black cockerel with the all-knowing eye struts, haunting the execution ground as he always does, and Lao Mangzi is wondering what he always wonders: *Is the man guilty?*

He is quite still, this man, a most venerable person kneeling in the shadow of a high pagoda, his eyes cast down toward the earth. He has a neat queue and a straight spine; his hands are tied behind his back. A mandarin, he is wearing glasses and a grass-cloth gown that is too thin for this morning's chill air, and he appears to be studying the splotches of blood, newly spilled and not his own, splattered on the ground in front of him. He seems unconcerned about the rabble that has gathered to watch his beheading.

With such a crowd at hand Lao Mangzi feels important and not a little conspicuous; although he cannot count so well beyond ten—or thirteen—he thinks there must be a thousand pairs of eyes at least, and all of them are looking at him. The apron he has just

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put on over his blood-spattered tunic is bright, imperial yellow—the color of an egg-yolk, his low and worthless wife said when she saw it. It is a color not often seen in this place, not that Lao Mangzi would know about that. To him, the apron is like everything else, a muted shade of gray. His name, Old Blind Eye, a name he was given and of which he is more than a little ashamed, implies that he is sightless, but this is quite inaccurate; it is only colors Lao Mangzi cannot see. Other things—most things, in fact—he sees quite as well as the next fellow.

It was the dead of night when the envoy arrived on a galloping horse from Peking. He carried a torch with a flame that soared, and he woke Lao Mangzi from a deep dream. "I bring this decree from the Great and Glorious Guangxu Emperor," the envoy said. "And from the Current Divine Mother Empress Dowager Cixi of the great Qing Empire," he continued after a large breath. He handed Lao Mangzi a scroll and a package wrapped in silk. The scroll was an imperial order for the summary execution of the scholar official whose name is Sai Anguo of Suzhou Prefecture, a man who was born in the seventeenth year of the illustrious Daoguang emperor. "Decapitation without delay," the envoy announced more loudly than was needed for Lao Mangzi's ears to hear. "The arrest is taking place right now," he said, and sleepy neighbors peeked out of their doorways to see who had come at this late hour.

The envoy's horse was magnificent; his boots were black, his helmet richly tasseled. Later, when Lao Mangzi had unwrapped the egg-yolk apron and held it out to show his wife, she shrank away from it. Her eyes were round with fear. Lao Mangzi knows she doesn't like his line of work. But is he guilty, this kneeling, venerable mandarin? Does a man like this deserve the knife, the saw, the axe—the sword?

The boy, whose head has just rolled from his shoulders, whose

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blood is still seeping into the ground, was certainly guilty. Guilty of stealing a meat bun. Guilty of having an empty belly. An executioner knows better than most that a bowl of rice is a bowl of rice, and a man's fate is a man's fate. And yet, Lao Mangzi prides himself on knowing who is innocent and who is not. There is more to his craft than a swipe of the sword. The bowl of rice must be avenged, of course, but sometimes Lao Mangzi worries about the ghosts who are missing their heads when they pass to the spirit world in the Western Heaven. Sometimes Lao Mangzi sees blood in his dreams, and he sees it then the way others see it always. He sees it as the mandarin sees the boy's blood now: thick and rich and bright—and red.

Unlike the boy, the mandarin has been offered narcotics and a hood, both of which he declined, and a reed mat on which to kneel, which he accepted with a deep bow. He seems unafraid, something Lao Mangzi has never seen in one whose head he is about to cut off. The boy knelt, hunched and shivering, and he drew his child-size shoulders sharply upward when Lao Mangzi signaled the final moment with a quick intake of breath and the raising of his two hands, sword in full swing. That last shrug and the vulnerable scrunch of the neck always come when the sword is ready to plunge. But perhaps not this time. The quiet mandarin is different from the others, Lao Mangzi thinks. He will not shrink back. This man is brave and dignified, someone to be honored.

In his last moments the boy sobbed aloud, and he soiled himself, and Lao Mangzi decided to think of him as innocent. He knows just how tempting a meat bun can be. He knows the way that hunger can tug at your guts and whisk away all notion of what it is to steal another man's possessions.

This morning, the mandarin's first wife sent for Lao Mangzi. It was just before dawn, before the day had even begun—it was after

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her husband's arrest. Dry-eyed, mute, neither young nor old, with her face made strange by the flame of a lantern, she dropped a coin into his hand, and the coin gleamed more brightly even than the flame. A bodhi-seed rosary darkened the woman's wrist, and her eyes searched Lao Mangzi's face. She said nothing, but he understood her meaning. She wants a sharp sword. A single cut. A swift death for her husband. Lao Mangzi nodded and bowed, and he murmured, "*A mi tuo fo*." A Buddhist blessing for the Buddhist wife. And he marveled at the great house in which the woman lives. Afterward, he honed the blade of his sword on a whetstone he turned with his callused toes and then tested it on the turnip his own wife will boil for supper. Lao Mangzi's stomach clenched at the sound of the blade slicing through crisp vegetable flesh, and with a single swipe the turnip split. It was his wife who bent down to pick up the pieces and carry them into the house.

A new twinge in his belly reminds Lao Mangzi now that he need not waste his pity. This woman with the dark rosary whose husband kneels and waits for death will dine this evening on much better food than a poor turnip and a few grains of rice. She is lucky in some things, maybe in most. And then Lao Mangzi thinks of something his late and virtuous mother said: "A single happiness can scatter a thousand sorrows." His thoughts go to the coin in his pocket, and to the slab of pork he will bring home to his cold dwelling to boil with the turnip, and to his worthless old wife, who will give him a rare smile when she sees what he has brought. And then his eyes crinkle, and he smiles broadly at the thought of his children with their bellies full of not just rice but pork-meat as well, and maybe a skewer of candied fruit.

Now the crowds are pressing closer, hungry to see blood. Five guards wearing dome-shaped helmets snap their whips to hold them back. And yet, Lao Mangzi knows that when he raises his sword

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high in the air most of the onlookers will flinch and shrink back and turn their eyes away, and they will think of the wolf in front and the tiger behind, and how their own fates may change to the worst, and how this can happen in less time than it takes to drink a cup of water. *Almost,* Lao Mangzi thinks, *that quickly.* And then, when the sword has fallen and the blood has spurted and the head has rolled like a cabbage onto the ground, the crowd will rush forward as one, every man wanting to dip a coin or two in the mandarin's blood for good luck.

The black cockerel is blinking, and Lao Mangzi is thinking, not for the first time, that the lacquered creature is passing judgment. The bird steps in front of the mandarin and puts his profile on display, and his wide eye sees all. "Innocent," the executioner confirms, and he is certain of the truth of this. The cockerel is almost never wrong, and as everyone knows, in these times even chance remarks can lead to a public execution.

The great bell at the Cold Mountain Temple is beginning to toll. Air is moving, and around the pagoda's roof in nine umbrella layers the sky is a cheerful color that to Lao Mangzi is just another shade of gray. It is time to shed the layers of imperial silk that cover his sword. They fall to his feet in a crumpled heap. The rooster ruffles his feathers, and the blade shines like a honed sliver of crescent moon, and Lao Mangzi runs his thumb across it one last time. A thin line of blood beads, and he nods and thinks briefly how lucky he is to be color-blind in daylight. The sun is moving across the sky, and the shadow of the pagoda tilts, then bows over the crowd and darkens the mandarin's face. Overhead, geese with wide wings and rough, untidy honks fly westward in a not-quite-perfect skein formation—and the mandarin looks up and murmurs something so sad, so full of anguish, that years later Lao Mangzi will remember what he said and how he said it. "A poet can capture the

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essence of birds," he says, "with the choice of just a few words. If I had a single moment more to teach my tiny daughter, what are the words that I would choose? What would I say to make her strong for the life she will live, alone and unprotected in these troubled times?" He speaks so softly that only Lao Mangzi, bending to remove the mandarin's glasses, can hear him.

The crowd is restless. The mandarin is facing west, his chin lifted. Drenched in sweat, the executioner tightens his grip on his sword, and closes his eyes, and repeats the blessing: *"A mi tuo fo."* May the Buddha protect you. His hands soar, and his shoulders heave, and Lao Mangzi is thinking of the tiny daughter who will live alone in troubled times, and who will not learn one more thing from her father. He knows that the quick, guttural grunt of his breath will be the last sound her father hears. That, and the cockerel's all-knowing crow, and Lao Mangzi wonders, *What will she do, this little child, when the mandarin father is dead?*

THE DAY BEFORE

Jinhua

"Baba, when you went to visit the emperor, did you see his dragon chair and his tiger sword with sharpness on two sides?"

Baba is sitting at the edge of Jinhua's bed. His face is gold from the glow of the lantern and marked with feathery lines.

"I did, Small Daughter," he answers, and the sound of his voice soothes her as it always does when it is late and time for bed. "I saw the dragon throne and the sword and much, much more. And to-

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morrow, when I have rested from my long journey, I will tell you stories about how it was in Peking with the emperor, and you, my little pearl, will tell me a story that I have never heard before."

Outside in the garden, the crickets are singing because that is what crickets do in autumn before they die in winter, and the sound of them ebbs and surges like a vast ocean song, and the moon is huge and low and tinged with red.

"Baba, the Forbidden City is very far away from here. I really, really wish you didn't have to go there ever again."

"The distance is more than two thousand *li*," Baba says. "And you know, Jinhua, that it is my duty to go whenever the emperor sends for me. That is why—it is the only reason why—I will ever go away and leave you."

"I know, Baba. You have to go because the Guangxu emperor is the ruler and you are the subject, and because it is written in the *Analects* that the subject must do what the ruler says in the same way that I must do what you say, and what my husband will say when I marry, and what my sons will say when my husband is dead."

The lantern is putting dots like stars in Baba's eyes, and he is smiling because Jinhua has learned what he has taught her about the way the world is ordered—and she has remembered the Three Obediences. He takes the lantern in his hand, which means that he is leaving now and it is time to sleep. Jinhua touches Baba's sleeve.

"Since the emperor is only a child, Baba, when you go to his palace with the golden roofs, do you tell him stories the way you tell stories to me?"

"No, Daughter, I do not," Baba answers. "A story is a garden you can carry in your pocket. The stories we tell ourselves and each other are for pleasure and refuge. Like gardens they are small places in a large world. But, Jinhua, we must never mistake the stories we

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tell for the truth. The emperor must protect the empire of the Great Qing. He must be wise, and to be wise he must know what is true and what is not, and this is why, Jinhua, I tell him only what is real about the way things are. I do not ever tell him stories."

Baba kisses Jinhua on the top of her head and pulls the warm red quilt all the way up to her chin, and Jinhua shivers under the silk because she knows that barbarian men from faraway places have come with ships and guns, and they are making Chinese people sick from opium—and forcing them to worship barbarian gods—and they are stealing silver and even whole cities from the empire. She wants Baba to stay a while longer and to tell her that even though these men have come from the West, the emperor is strong and he will protect her, and Baba, and all of the people in China.

"Baba?" She hears him sigh and knows that this must be her last question.

"What will I do if the emperor calls for you and doesn't let you come back to me?"

"Do not worry, Jinhua, about what has not yet happened. The future is long. Now, close your eyes and sleep, and do not allow today to use up the moments that belong to tomorrow."

"Baba?" Jinhua has one more thing to say, and she whispers it. "I wish that you would disobey the emperor and stay here with me forever and for always."

Baba's stories begin in the same way, always: "Long, long ago in ancient times, when just wishing a thing made it so . . ." Jinhua's favorite story is the one he tells about the goddess Nüwa, who was just like Mama, and Baba says it is his favorite story, too, because

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Mama was the one he loved most of all—except for Jinhua—and he loved her that much even though she was only a concubine and not a first wife like Timu.

"Long, long ago in ancient times, when just wishing a thing made it so, there lived a goddess." And here Baba always pauses, and he and Jinhua continue telling the story in unison because they have told it so often together that in each of their heads it is as ripe as a melon that rolls from the vine, and the words slip from their tongues in just that way. "And the goddess was curious and wise and virtuous, and her name was Nüwa, and she was—just—like—Mama." The last part of this—the words *just like Mama*—they always say slowly because the story is really about Mama, and their words—Baba's and Jinhua's—fall precisely together like two bright cherries joined on a stem. Jinhua wriggles with joy, hugging her pajama-covered knees to her chest.

"And"—Baba continues the story by himself and Jinhua waits every time for every word—"Nüwa explored the beautiful earth when there were no people, and there was East and West and North and South, and she went to all of these places, but she was lonely and sad. And that is why, on one very special day, she made thinking, laughing, dancing creatures out of golden clay to make the world alive. And then," Baba always adds, and Jinhua loves this part best of all, "she made a little child like you, Jinhua. In just the way that Mama made you. And this is how it really was long, long ago in ancient times."

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2

DESTINED TO BREAK

First Wife (*Timu*)

First Wife feels no grief. How could she? Just like something flying past your ear—*hua*—that quickly a husband is dead and the servants have stolen away.

She had no warning. She supposes her husband—her honorable husband—did not know himself that the emperor would order his beheading. When he returned from Peking he said nothing. And then she thinks that surely, almost certainly, he knew that this would happen and didn't say anything for the shame of it. That would be like him, to shrink from the shame when really she needed him to tell her what to do when he was gone, how to live a life that is not the same as it was before, and what to do with the concubine's child. He knows she isn't a strong woman. It was his long tongue, she supposes, that brought him this trouble.

The coffin maker's boy came quickly. He came to the third gate and said, "Lady, you will be needing a coffin." He smiled and had an eye that wandered and was rheumy, and she didn't speak—of

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course. He dropped his gaze to the ground, where it lingered as though nothing were something. She sent him away with a wave of her hand. She is not prepared to do this thing, to order a coffin for her husband. It is all so sudden, and there is so much to be thought about, so terribly much to be done.

First Wife loops the bodhi-seed rosary around the loosely fisted fingers of her left hand. She positions it between the knuckle and joint of her forefinger in the place where the violet callus has bloomed from all her praying, and with her right hand she arranges the hem of her gown to kneel. One knee cracks—it is the right knee that gives her trouble in the autumn—and she lowers herself onto the flat, square cushion she uses when she sits in prayer. Her anger is close, and enlightenment feels very far away. Of all the things, it is the child about which she is most angry. About being left with her, just the two of them and no one else. The fat key with which she locked the gate to the courtyard, the child inside, has left flecks of rust on the palm of her hand, and she notices this only now. Her feet ache inside their bindings as she settles her weight on the cushion.

It is evening, and at last the child has stopped calling for her father. She does not yet know that he will never come again. A bald nut drops from a branch and skitters along the lichen-pitted roof tiles, and this is the only sound First Wife can hear. With her thumb she presses on the first bead of the rosary and feels pain like a bruise. *I feel and hear and remember as though from the inside of my own grave,* she is thinking. It has been this way for a long time even though she—unlike her husband, and unlike the concubine he loved so much—is alive and of this world. Freshly lit incense unleashes curling, potent veins of spice, and a dove calls out from the silver almond tree in the garden, where it is hiding under a pink sky. Its call is a ruffled, throaty sound that makes her want to weep. *Gulu, gulu, gulu.*

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First Wife moves her thumb to the next bead, and the rosary shifts across the callus. The dove calls out a second time from the same almond tree that the concubine planted when the child was plump in her belly. First Wife remembers angling her eye to the merest sliver of a crack in the gate and watching her. With her widening hips and the spill of her blue gown as she knelt to take the earth into her hands, the concubine was beautiful and virtuous and surrounded by people who loved her.

The tree was just a sapling then. Now First Wife's loathing blooms like a fresh boil, even though the concubine's joy was as brief, almost, as a drink of tea. She died giving birth to the child, whom she has locked behind the gate, and that was seven years ago. First Wife wished then that it had been the child who had died. She wishes it now. That would have been a just and equitable fate.

Outside, the pink sky is disappearing quickly to the west. It is getting dark and cold, and there is no servant left to light the lanterns or the brazier. No one to bring mimosa-bark tea to nourish First Wife's heart, or a simple meal for her supper. She overheard Lao Zhao, the cook, this afternoon warning the other servants. It is his habit to discuss things loudly, especially things that make him important in the eyes of others. He told the servants that a headless body cannot proceed in the proper way to the afterlife. He smacked his lips at the delicious sound of his own voice, and First Wife could not close her ears to what he was saying. At the edge of the kitchen wall she kept herself hidden, and she ground the beads of the rosary painfully into her palm, and she listened. She kept her eyes closed and heard cruelty in Lao Zhao's voice, and the creaking of the beads, and the *ò*'s and *a*'s and *ai*'s of the servants. Lao Zhao said that the master's ghost was tormented, that he would be back this very night to disturb the household. "Demand your wages and go," was his advice to the others. *Smack. Smack.* He has such a large voice, and people listen to

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what he says, and he carried on for a long time. He said that he had gone to watch; he saw it happen, this terrible thing, and it took only one stroke of the sword to slice through the bone and tissue that joined the venerable master's head to his venerable body. *Thank Old Heaven and thank Earth for that,* First Wife thought when she heard this. The executioner has earned his silver coin, and in this, at least, she has been a worthy wife. She has given her husband the kind of death that happens in an instant. But then she heard Lao Zhao asking, "Who will fetch the pieces of the master's body? Will the lady do it? Does she have the strength?" And then he asked another question. "What will she do with the child, who is her sworn enemy?"

It was while Lao Zhao was talking that First Wife decided to lock the gate to the child's courtyard. Just for a while, she told herself, so that she could turn this all over in her mind. So that she could decide what to do. No one asked her if she needed any last thing. Not a single one of them, even though she paid them twice what they were owed, or more. She would not have answered if they had, of course. She has said nothing, not a word to anyone, since the day the child's mother was delivered in a red sedan chair, dressed as a real bride in vermilion, and carried to a bridal bed, a new one just for her that was littered with dates and eggs and pomegranate seeds to make her fertile. On that day, First Wife swallowed once, and with that swallow she consumed her own voice. *Forever and for always,* she told herself. Since then she has uttered only soundless prayers and had nothing at all to say in the worldly realm.

Now that everyone has gone and the child is locked away, First Wife moves her thumb to the third bead of the rosary and searches her memory for the words to the heart sutra, the way to a peaceful mind. A fly, orange eyed and glossy winged, alights on her wrist at the edge of her sleeve, and she cannot find the words to the sutra. She has not yet ordered her husband's coffin or arranged to collect

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the pieces of him, and her heart feels large and pulpy, like a swollen, aching piece of fruit that fills her chest. The fly meanders on pinprick legs along a vein on her hand, and First Wife is thinking of the child and wondering whether she has fallen asleep and reminding herself that she loathes her almost as much as she loathed the concubine, or maybe more. And she is thinking, too, that she should be weeping blood for her dead husband, but instead she wants to feel his touch in a loving way—just once more after all this time. Kneeling, she shifts her weight and the fly leaves her and she knows now more clearly than ever before that she, unlike the concubine, has not been loved enough in this life.

The go-between's vulture hands are what First Wife thinks of when she wakes from a brief sleep, her heart pounding. She did not mean to close her eyes. The sky is black, and it is cold. She lights a lantern, ties a fresh knot in her hair, and tightens the bindings on her feet. She is clumsy with these tasks that are normally done for her by others.

First Wife didn't much like the look of the woman who came to the gate almost as swiftly as the coffin boy did when the news got out. She was poor and ugly and unpleasant to look at. "Mama dead. Baba dead," the woman said. "Lady want sell little girl?" She reached into the folds of her tunic with those awful hands, groping as though she were scratching herself. She pulled out a piece of paper, none too clean and badly folded, and held it up.

"Contract," she said. "You look. Tomorrow I come back. We talk." Her eyes moved, taking in the view of all that lies inside the gate, and First Wife felt uneasy. She allowed the woman to put that paper in her hand.

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There has been no evening meal, and there will be no breakfast this morning—but First Wife has left hunger far behind. The paper is on her writing table. It is just as it would be, of course: white, the color of mourning; grimy, like a contract to sell cabbages or chickens or pigs; awkwardly written, as by a near illiterate. She begins to read aloud, following the characters on the page with the pale tip of her fingernail. After years of silence, her voice is clear and beautiful and surprising, and the words she reads are easily said aloud—and her hands and her heart are steady.

Contract for Selling Child Who Is Not Wanted

According to the Contract, First Wife of Child's Father is the Seller and Go-Between Li is the Buyer. Mother and Father of Child are dead, as of yesterday morning by chopping off head in the case of Father, and a long time ago although no one has said exactly when in the case of Mother, and no one wants to keep the Child. Therefore, First Wife is agreeing to sell her. The buying price is one silver tael per year, which is Seven Years Old. The Buyer, who is Li as is already said, has agreed to the price but before she pays the money she will check the Child for sickness and defects. After this, she will be sold as is. She will be taken away and no one can try to find her. It is hereunto agreed that after this Li will be allowed to sell the Child to any Buyer for any amount of coins and that the Buyer will be allowed to do anything to her that he wants, even punish her in any way or sell her to any other person. If the Child is killed or has any accident, all people will agree that it is the Will of Heaven and not the fault of anyone.

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First Wife's thumb is on the eighteenth bead. She is unwilling, but memories claw at her, and tonight, before she goes to her bed, she must visit one last time the large space in her mind in which her baby lived. Something in her arms is cold and precious. She cradles it: the damp and almost weightless husk of her newborn son. The fluids of a new life glisten on the baby's skin. His tiny fists are closed, as tight as walnuts; his eyelids, pink and petal thin, collapse in folds. He is all that matters, for a woman must bear her husband a son, and she has done this thing, and it was painful almost beyond endurance. *His future is long,* she remembers thinking about the child in her arms, *and mine is now assured.* And then she felt Si Shen in the room, and the death spirit threatened her quietly, gently, and then he took the baby's toes, his shoulders, and his earlobes, his tiny elbows and his precious face. He made them still and took away her baby's life.

First Wife remembers kneeling on the flat gray pillow, just as she is kneeling now. Her husband's soft slippers came; he placed his fine hand on her shoulder, and he, too, was weeping. She turned away and knew it was forever; she knew then that she would become what she is now: a demon with an empty mouth for the rest of this miserable life that she has not yet finished living. The eighteen beads of the rosary cannot calm her today. She takes a breath into her demon's body and then another, and she tells herself, *The concubine's child means less than nothing.*

This is not the truth; the child means everything. First Wife's gown is damp with sweat from the backs of her thighs, and the sweat is as heavy as blood and as heavy as the fluids of birth, and she wonders in a fleeting way whether the child, alone behind the locked gate, is afraid of the dark. The words to the heart sutra come to her now and suddenly, and she needs them more than ever before.

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Go, go, go beyond. Go thoroughly beyond and establish yourself in enlightenment.

She speaks the words aloud. She repeats them over and over, long into the night, and understands impermanence. And when it is morning, First Wife goes in search of scissors and a razor, telling herself, *The child will be punished, but first I must begin to punish myself.*

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3
TIME THAT HAS PASSED

Jinhua

A hacking cough in the distance is the night-soil man with the wobbly voice and opium in his throat. Jinhua lies still for a moment in her bed, busy with remembering. She has been waiting for Baba for one whole day and one whole night, calling his name until her voice hurt, waiting to tell him that she has lost her wiggling, jiggling tooth. She is hungry enough to eat the wind, and her eyes are fat from crying. She remembers now that the red gate was stuck shut yesterday for all the day. No one has come to look after her. No one has come.

Outside, birds are twittering, *jijizhazha,* and now their conversation stops and the only noises are the sounds that Jinhua is making. She straightens a leg, shifts a hip tightly wrapped in bedding, and opens her eyes to a blank wall. She is not used to waking up alone. She is not used to putting herself to bed.

Last night when the sky turned black, she tried to think of a story to tell Baba when he comes. One that he has never heard

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before about the Monkey King, who is extremely strong and can leap a distance of one hundred and eight thousand *li* in a single somersault, and who has traveled far, far to the west. She will invent a new and special story in which the Monkey King bravely defeats the barbarians in a great battle fought high up in the trees and then sends them and their ships, guns, and opium away from China, back to where they came from. She held the book about the Monkey King's journey in her lap but didn't open it. She lay down and curled herself around it. And then she told herself, *Tomorrow everything will be the way it always has been. Meiling, the maid, will come with breakfast rice and her soft, soft voice that is,* Jinhua thinks, *the way a real mother's voice would be.* And Baba will come too, through the red gate, wearing his blue gown that smells like sweet tobacco and has the word *shou* for "long life" woven into the fabric in more places than Jinhua can count—and she will run to him and Baba will catch her, and she will take his braided queue in her fingers and wrap it around her wrist as many times and as tightly as she can. And—even if the emperor calls for Baba he will—

Tomorrow all will be well, Jinhua told herself as her eyes fluttered shut and she drifted off to sleep.

So—now it is tomorrow, and the morning light is brown through wooden shutters, and the air smells of nothing. Jinhua turns toward the door. The bedding catches her hips like a belt tightening, and she gasps. The door is open. Someone is here in the room. The person is not Baba. It is not Meiling or any of the other servants. It is someone she does not know. Someone without any hair.

"In a single day all has become empty, and enlightenment is near." Dark eyes glitter in a silver face, and the words are a chant, and the face belongs to a woman, as thin as a needle, dressed like a nun in dull gray. Jinhua waits.

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"Your father was my husband before he loved your mother," the woman says, and Jinhua sees that it is First Wife, Timu, standing there and saying these words. "And now there is only emptiness without body or feeling or will." Timu's voice fades in and out, and she is as bald as a mushroom, and Jinhua's tongue explores the hard-edged gap where her tooth is lost. She doesn't move. She is a little afraid, but more than this she is astonished because Timu is talking, saying things out loud even though she has made a vow to never speak and to always be sad, and she made this vow a long, long time ago.

In one hand, Timu is holding something long and white; in the other she has something dark and strange. She begins to move the hand with the strange, dark thing—it is Timu's left hand—and she moves it very slowly. "Look," Timu says. "This is emptiness." Her prayer beads that she never doesn't wear slip at the edge of her sleeve. "There are no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue," she is saying, and Timu is spreading her fingers carefully like a fan opening, tilting her hand, making the beads tremble at her wrist. "Look, look, look," she murmurs, and her face is scary, and she and Jinhua both watch as the dark thing falls, separating into clumps that drop to the floor and settle in mounds at Timu's feet. "And now there is no hair. It was the last thing to hold me in the realm of earthly attachments, the last thing to make me a wife. Now it is gone, and so is your father."

Air moves in the room, ruffling the mounds of Timu's black hair freshly cut from her horrible, naked scalp. Jinhua's breath comes in small gasps, and Timu takes a step closer to the bed. Tiny shoes peek out from the hem of her gown. They are watermelon red, embroidered bridal shoes.

"Your Baba has gone to the Western Heaven to join the ancestors," she says now. The white thing hangs limply from Timu's

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hand, not quite touching the floor—*and what is Timu saying?* Jinhua sees loose threads, a coarse weave, a ragged hem, a sleeve. She is shivering. It is a gown in Timu's hand. It is white, the color for mourning, a *xiaofu*. It is what people wear to weep and wail when a person is dead.

"Get up now, child. Put this on to show your grief," Timu says, and something as large as an egg lodges in Jinhua's throat. It feels as though it will be there for a long time, and the gown looks far too big—*and Baba always comes back after a while. He always does, but where is he now?*

Timu is speaking quickly, and she is offering the *xiaofu* with two hands outstretched as though she were giving a gift, the prayer beads dangling at her wrist, the gown moving like a demon, a white one, slowly closer to Jinhua. And Timu is talking, talking, talking, and her eyes and lips and teeth are leaping from her face, and now the prayer beads are as shrill as a whistle close to Jinhua's ear. Timu says that Baba is dead. She says that the sword to cut off his head was the emperor's sword, and it was sharp. The sleeve of the white gown is a blur touching Jinhua's cheek, her ear, her forehead, brushing against her skin, hurting her. She covers her ears with her fists, and there is no air to breathe—and all that she can think about is that Timu is a liar. She should go away and please, please stop talking, stop saying those things about Baba. And while she thinks these things Jinhua is becoming more and more afraid—*and can it be true that the emperor's sword has cut off Baba's head?*

There is a sudden silence. Timu's breath is close, and her ears bloom neat and small against her hairless head, and she is perfectly still for a moment. Then she wails, "We must both strive for virtue, child, you and I." And she howls, "*Shi bu zai lai*." Time that has passed will never come back.

Jinhua goes limp. Light streams through the open door like

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narrow fingers; outside in the street a bucket of water hits the ground with a loud smack, and Jinhua folds herself around her knees. She bites down hard into her kneecap with her front teeth, and there is a gap for the one that fell out this morning, and she knows that Baba isn't coming back. And she knows more than this. She knows that it is the emperor who has cut off Baba's head with his tiger sword that has sharpness on two sides—and Jinhua's own words, the words she said to Baba, are in her ears now, clear and huge and terrifying: "Baba, I wish that you would disobey the emperor . . ."

Timu is nodding as though she knows all this, and Jinhua has a question, and the question is urgent. She asks it in a whisper that is like a sob.

"Who will look after me now?"

Timu covers her face with her hands. "I cannot give you an answer," she says. "I am wind blowing from an empty cave, and I am neither more nor less than this." And then, with two fingers extended from her fist, Timu makes the round gesture of chopsticks fetching food from a bowl, and the sound of the prayer beads is softer than it was before.

"There is rice on the table. Eat it, child. Today you will need *yuanqi*—you will need all of your strength when the go-between comes to get you."

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