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The next morning, a carriage and mules stood in front of the house of the family Song. Usually a court official such as An Ming Song had his own mules and horses, complete with blankets embroidered with the imperial insignia. But this was not a journey on official business, which is why An Ming decided to take private transportation. When the coachman realized that he would be driving a court official, he quickly tried to brush the road dust off the carriage seats. He even started grooming his animals. One of the servants teased, “You think you can make horses out of your mules. You should be giving them lots to eat, because you have a long journey ahead of you.”
The coachman answered gruffly, “Hopefully we won’t meet these foreign devils on our trip. People say that they act very strangely. When two of them meet, I hear they bite each other in the cheek and pull on each other’s arm at the same time.”

“That’s nothing,” countered the servant, “I hear they put an eye in the middle of their foreheads so they can see far away.”

Then it was the coachman’s turn again. “Man, I’ve even been told that some of them have this little box. If you look in it and turn a crank, you can see naked women.”

They broke into loud laughter. But they suddenly went silent as they heard the man of the house approaching. Although he was not wearing his court uniform, his gait and poise showed his high station.

As An Ming talked to them, the coachman quickly noticed that he was very personable and not at all arrogant. An Ming asked if the animals had had enough fodder and inspected the carriage seats. Then he gave his servants some instructions and returned to the house.

A little later, some young girls with tucked-up braids appeared. They were wearing wide, light green pants and knee-long peach-colored dresses with wide sleeves bordered in violet. Anyone seeing the girls would have thought they belonged to a high-ranking family because of their expensive clothes. But the coachman recognized that they were servant girls because their feet were not bound like the noble women who referred to this practice as the “golden lotus”.

The girls brought blankets, some chests and wooden boxes as well as various household objects to the carriage. Yi Mei appeared while they were busy loading the coach. She radiated harmony today, unlike the day before, and did not let betray her inner tension to anyone. Two serving women accompanied her. They had been part of her dowry when she married An Ming. When a girl from a wealthy family married, it often happened that they took their servant women with them into the new household. These serving women could also become concubines of the new master if their mistress permitted it. It was not unusual that rich men weren’t satisfied by only one woman. Girls from noble families were trained to resist jealousy in order to secure their position within the family and the society. The marriages themselves were often arranged. Since the position of the wife in the family was unimpeachable, there was little ground for jealousy. On the contrary. The more a wife helped her husband to find the right concubines, the more respect she received in return.

Both servant women put pillows in the carriage and helped Yi Mei climb in. Then a servant man came and sat down next to the coachman.

Finally, An Ming Song approached the carriage and said, “Niangzi, my good thoughts will accompany you. As soon as the city is safe, I will send for you again. There is no danger where you are going. If our child is born in the meantime, please name it Mo Li if it’s a girl and An Guo if it’s a boy.”

The young woman fought to hold back her tears. She wanted to say something, but she could not make a sound. Her husband gave the signal to lower the bamboo curtain, and then the carriage began moving.

An Ming accompanied her to the end of the Alley of the Iron Lions. Soon she would pass through the East Gate, but the future on both sides of it was uncertain.

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Chao-Hsiu Chen
Empress Dowager Cixi was able to escape from the expeditionary forces, dressed as a peasant. She forced her nephew, the young Emperor Guangxu whom she had deposed and imprisoned two years before, to come with her. On the one hand, she was afraid he might launch a coup to regain power if he remained in Beijing. On the other hand, she needed him as a hostage. The foreign troops would not accept her as Empress, but they did recognize her nephew as ruler. People on the streets joked about the situation: “The people are afraid of Cixi, Cixi is afraid of the foreigners, and the foreigners are afraid of the people.”

Beijing had changed completely. The tea and wine houses no longer rang with plays and musical recitals, and the Bridge of Heaven and the large squares had lost their acrobats and storytellers. Most of the artists had left the city. Almost all the shops were closed, and there was no teaching in the schools.

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In mid July, Yi Mei and her servants reached Tianjin. From there, their journey continued by boat. But before they could reach the harbor, several members of a secret society barred their way. “We are the Boxers for Right and Unity,” the three men and five women called out, “We have to search you. You may be spies for the foreigners.”

They opened the boxes and began to rummage though them. But fortunately Yi Mei was able to show them a paper from An Ming, validated with the imperial seal, explaining who she was and where she was going.

Brute force had ruled the streets of Beijing ever since Cixi had enlisted the help of the Boxers to drive the allied army (composed of English, French, German, Austrian, Italian, Russian, Japanese and American soldiers) out of the city. The rebel Boxers tyrannized the people, accusing everyone of being a traitor, and anyone caught consorting with a foreigner or a priest, seen going to a church or trading goods from outside China was summarily executed.

The rebels ran through the streets of Tianjin, sacking and plundering. They broke the windows of stores selling western merchandise, and since no one could stop them, they left a trail of destruction throughout the whole city.

Although Yi Mei had nothing to fear from the Boxers, it was the first time she had come face to face with lawlessness. She began to understand why it had been so important for her to leave Beijing, but the more she considered it, the more she grew worried about her husband.

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Yi Mei was only able to obtain ship passage for herself and her three servants with the aid of her husband’s official writ. They weren’t the only refugees on board. Besides them there were many others scrambling to get as far away as possible from places where the fighting was going on.
Yi Mei had traveled this route along the river once before—shortly after her wedding, when An Ming had taken her to Xian to present her to his grandmother. Because of her great age, the grandmother had not been able to travel to Beijing for the wedding ceremony. She was the wife of a highly-acclaimed scholar at the Imperial Academy. All the family members were expected to attain exalted positions in society and in the court so that they may not shame their ancestors and instead shed glory and honor upon the entire family.

Yi Mei stood at the railing, gazing at the yellow-brown water of the great river slipping by. She thought of the happiness she had enjoyed such a short time ago, when she was the proud bride of a court official, wedded with a pageantry normally reserved for a princess.

On that day, she had donned a headpiece ornamented with jade and pearls and was wrapped in a precious gown covered with a red silk cowl embroidered with pearls. Wearing a veil, she was carried in the marriage sedan chair to the house of her future husband whom she had not yet seen. The only thing she knew about him at this point was that he was a high-ranking court official from a respected family. Yi Mei had no cause to complain about this arranged marriage, but in her heart of hearts, she still hoped that he would not be too ugly. An Ming also had similar thoughts, but he placed his trust in the experienced marriage brokers. After all, everyone knew that love came after marriage, and not before.

The wedding ceremony became a glorious, colorful event that stretched from the western to the Eastern city gates. Hundreds of guests and curious bystanders enjoyed an exceptionally splendid spectacle. It began when an orchestra paid for by An Ming’s family arrived in front of Yi Mei’s parents’ house to perform an exclusive musical recital. Yi Mei knew that this music also signaled that the marriage sedan chair had arrived and that she should say good-bye to her family and step out into a new future. Like most brides, Yi Mei did this in tears, both of sorrow at leaving her old family and of joy that she could soon start her own family. .... (coming soon on Amazon Kindle)
One day the Master and his pupil arrived at a village in which almost every house was bordered by a magnificent orchard – fragrances of peach, almond, plum and apricot blossom filled the air. Spring’s temptations were everywhere.

In one of the gardens, a young girl was picking flowers. As she bent down, her plait of long, black hair stroked the earth. Her silhouette reminded one of a precious vase made from the finest porcelain. As the boy watched her, he felt for the very first
time, a strong longing inside him. It was a feeling he had never experienced before; both joyful and painful at the same time. At this moment the girl left the garden, and as she passing the two wanderers, shyly lowered her gaze.

The boy soon asked, “Master, should we follow her home and ask for our meal?”

The Master did not answer, and the girl was soon out of sight. The Master and his pupil eventually came upon a small house in the village where they tried to make themselves noticed. The old, weathered door of the house slowly opened, and out came a blind old man who addressed some words in their direction,

“Where are you?” he called out. “Come in and join us for a meal.”

The Master took the boy’s hands and entered the house, which looked totally different from the inside. It had a cosy feel to it, was clean and brightly lit, and kneeling by the fire place tending the flames, was the girl they had met not long before in the orchard.

“My granddaughter told me that you were here,” said the blind man. “Please, take a seat, the food will be ready soon.” As the boy reached the table, he was able to steal a glimpse of the girl’s face, and was so enchanted by what he saw that he forgot to sit down; he was rooted to the spot.

“Take a seat,” he heard the Master saying.

Then the blind man began to speak:

“I live here alone with my granddaughter, came to live with me after her parents died in a terrible snow accident many years ago. At first it was my job to take care of her, however as the years went on my sight slowly deteriorated, until one morning I woke up and could not see anymore. Since then, she has looked after me, and does so with such loving kindness that I can live with my affliction quite contentedly.”

“He who cannot see the sufferings of life is a fortunate man indeed,” said the Master.

“You must be very wise.” said the girl. “Can you tell me whether I will one day meet my parents again?”
The room remained silent for a while, until the Master eventually spoke up:

“There is no death in life; things simply take a different shape. Leaves fall from the tree and become earth, which in turn helps new trees to grow.”

“But people are not trees,” retorted the boy.

The Master went on,
“We are all one. We live, pass on, transform and return according to the same laws.

The river of change runs through us. Each of us is and remains but a tiny droplet of water in its ever flowing cycle, in this moment and all those to come.”

“And what about love?” inquired the boy, “Is it also subject to this law?”

“Love is always there, even when it appears to be absent,” answered the Master.

The young girl’s grandfather, who was sitting between the Master and the boy, said:

“Whatever is destined to be is unavoidable, and that which shall never come to pass we cannot force. Everything happens because it has to happen. Now let us dine!” ...................... (coming soon on Amazon Kindle)