
BOUND

DONNA JO NAPOLI ATHENEUM BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS
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**For Michael Chen, who introduced me to the three perfections, and for Lii Ying and Yuh Teh
Chen, who helped me try to understand them.**

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Breath

The Great God Pan

Daughter of Venice

Beast

Crazy Jack

Spinners (with Richard Tchen)

Sirena

For the Love of Venice

Stones in the Water

Song of the Magdeline

Zel

The Magic Circle

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Note to reader: The name of the main character, Xing Xing, is pronounced “Shing Shing.”

Xing Xing squatted by the water, silent and unmoving. Her stillness was a prayer.

It was answered: The sun glinted red. Only an instant and it was over, but there could be no doubt; her eyes had not played tricks: A white fish with red fins and golden eyes zipped past and under a lotus leaf. She laughed in delight.

“Lazy One, bring the firewood,” came the distant call.

In the past year “Lazy One” had practically become Xing Xing’s household name. She imagined her father’s wife holding one hand above her eyes against the sun that was so bright today, it had already burned off the morning fog. She imagined her frowning in impatience, then ducking back into the shadows of the cave. The girl picked up the armful of wood she’d gathered and rushed back along the path. Her hair was tied in two hanging knots that thumped on her shoulders as she ran. *Hurry, they drummed, hurry hurry.* The cold dirt licked at her feet. *Hurry hurry.*

But she was wrong. Stepmother had not gone inside. The woman shivered in the chill of spring, arms crossed over her chest. “Get inside, Lazy One.” She yanked one of Xing Xing’s hair knots as the girl raced past through the open door.

The air of the main cavern had changed already. While the roof was so thick that the temperature hardly varied from summer to winter, the quality of the air could change drastically. Right now it had grown clammy. Xing Xing knelt and fed tinder to the coals of the dying fire, then sticks, then the wood she’d just brought in. The door squeaked shut behind her. Stepmother didn’t oil the hinges on purpose because the noise scared away demons. Xing Xing got to her feet and turned around to find Stepmother standing right there, her hands on her hips, her muscled arms cocked like wings.

“Wood doesn’t grow from springs,” said Stepmother.

Xing Xing knew this was Stepmother’s way of asking why she’d come from the direction of the pond rather than the woods. She’d seen the beautiful pool fish twice now—yesterday afternoon and again this morning. It was her secret. Stubbornness entered her. She looked in Stepmother’s eyes without blinking.

“But water does.” Stepmother hobbled over and picked up the water bucket and carrying pole. She hobbled back and put one in each of Xing Xing’s hands. “Are you waiting for grass to grow under your feet?”

Xing Xing ran out the door again, leaving it open. She rushed through the buzz of the bees they kept in the hive on the side of their cave. *Rush rush, buzz buzz.*

“My daughter will wake soon,” called Stepmother after her. “And hunger hurts.”

Xing Xing returned to the pond, only too happily. She filled the bucket, then walked around the edge, looking. The thought of Stepmother’s daughter waking and complaining of hunger quickened her pace. It wasn’t that her half sister would be truly hungry, not like the old beggar men who wandered the village, hands outstretched, and slept at night under the raised floor of the public pavilion. Rather, her half sister’s stomach would simply have emptied of the meal she ate last night. But she felt so poorly these days that Xing Xing didn’t want to allow even that small amount of extra discomfort. Besides, her complaints could result in a smack on the head for Xing Xing.

Xing Xing was practically running now.

The fish didn't show itself.

Well, of course not. Secrets could never be rushed. They had to come of their own accord, on their own schedule. That way, when they came, they offered themselves as a gift.

Xing Xing leaned over the water, extending her right cheek till she could feel the wetness that hovered in the air close to the pond's surface. "Later," she sang. Then she stood and turned in a circle, lifting her chin so both her cheeks could brush the dry air. This was her way of caressing the spirit of her mother so that she could feel close by. She balanced the bucket on one end of the pole and put the other end over her shoulder, then walked home without spilling a drop.

Wei Ping slept sideways across the bed with her legs dangling over the edge. Her mother, Stepmother had rolled the rock from the high hole that served as a window, so sunbeams played on her chest. She opened her eyes, rose to sitting, and stretched one thin leg. Her face grimaced with pain as she rubbed behind that knee. She did the same to the other leg. A tear escaped and ran down her cheek. Her lips tightened into a wide line. She looked at the gaily-colored bandages around her feet, and the very corners of her mouth rose in satisfaction.

Xing Xing could tell Wei Ping was admiring herself—an immodest act that one should avoid both practicing and witnessing in others. Xing Xing looked down at her own feet, but too late, for Wei Ping happened to glance at her first.

“No one cares about your feet,” hissed Wei Ping. She grabbed one of the stools waiting by the bedstead and searched around for the other. It had somehow tumbled out of reach. “Get me that stool Lazy One.”

Xing Xing pushed the stool to her half sister.

Wei Ping knelt with one knee on each stool and took a loud, deep breath. Then she threw her weight on one knee and moved the other stool forward with her hands. She threw her weight on the other knee and moved the second stool forward with her hands. In this manner, she worked her way over to the *kang*, never putting weight on her feet. The *kang* was the most-used piece of furniture in their home—where one could eat and talk and sew and even nap. It was adjacent to the stove, with a fire passage inside its stone slabs. Heat from the cooking fire passed under it, then out through the chimney in the roof of the cave. As Wei Ping passed Xing Xing, she spat on her toes. “No one will find you a husband.”

Xing Xing knew words spoken in pain could be far crueler than the speaker really intended. Still, she had to bite the insides of her cheeks to hold in a gasp. For what Wei Ping said was true enough to cut deep.

Xing Xing’s mother had died when Xing Xing was seven years old. She and Stepmother had lived side by side in the cave as the two wives of the master potter Wu, who had himself died a year ago, when Xing Xing was but thirteen. With no father or mother, there was no one to arrange a marriage for Xing Xing.

Wei Ping was only a year older than Xing Xing, but Stepmother had already begun preparations for finding her a husband. Indeed, she’d started within a month of Wu’s death. Wei Ping had a face that was neither plain nor pretty, but she was slender as a reed, exactly as men preferred their wives. If she’d had her feet bound at the age of six, when Stepmother had first proposed it to Wu, her feet would be small enough to fit in a man’s hand like a golden lotus blossom, and she’d already undoubtedly be betrothed. But though both of Wu’s wives had tiny bound feet, the potter didn’t want his daughters’ feet bound. He had grown up way down south, where not so many women bound their feet, and he didn’t like the custom. Besides, he had enjoyed the assistance of his daughters in his shop—and that work required them to have full use of their feet.

Stepmother had argued that Wu could hire labor for the shop or buy a slave girl to help out. After all, they hired labor to help in the household chores. The potter wouldn’t hear of it; if strangers saw him work, they might sell the secrets of his special ways to other potters.

Stepmother had argued that, despite her small size, Xing Xing was exceptionally strong while Wei Ping was delicate; Xing Xing could do the work of both girls. But the potter said that exalting the daughter Wei Ping over the daughter Xing Xing would go precisely contrary to his dead wife's wishes. Anyway, out here in the country, foot binding generally didn't start till a girl reached puberty, unlike in the city, where it started sometimes even before the child turned six.

Stepmother lamented. She'd wake her husband in the morning with her hand in front of his face, fingers spread to the length of Wei Ping's feet, screeching about *zhang*—growth—and quoting sayings from the first teacher, Kong Fu Zi—Master Kong—about doing the right thing at the right moment. Still, Wu insisted that Stepmother wait.

Once he was dead, though, the woman lost no time. Wei Ping's feet were already as long as the full spread of Stepmother's fingers, much longer than Xing Xing's feet, but the woman swore that with the proper binding, they could shrink.

Xing Xing drained the pot of boiling water chestnuts. Then she poured them onto the mat tray and shook the tray gently, so they'd roll around and cool off faster.

Wei Ping moaned from the *kang*.

"Lazy One," said Stepmother, "my daughter is hungry."

Xing Xing knew the moan was because Wei Ping's feet hurt, but no one was allowed to talk about that. Besides, Xing Xing avoided saying anything to Stepmother unless it was absolutely necessary. She peeled the steaming nuts as fast as she could, blowing on her fingers the whole while.

Stepmother sat on the stone bench outside the cave entrance sewing. She was making a fine dress for Wei Ping.

Xing Xing passed behind her, quiet as a plumed egret.

“Flat feet make noise no matter what,” said Stepmother. “Even stunted ones like yours.” She pulled a strip of cloth out of a purse tied to her sleeve and held it out to Xing Xing. “My daughter needs meat for supper.”

Xing Xing’s mouth twisted in worry; she was a poor hunter of land creatures. The range of things Stepmother expected her to do kept growing. This was the third time within a month that she’d handed Xing Xing that hunting cloth.

But Wei Ping really did need meat. When Xing Xing washed her half sister’s foot bandages, she had scrub hard to get the bloodstains out. And lately Wei Ping’s feet oozed a foul-smelling yellow liquid that seemed to drain away her energy. Meat brought energy, and Xing Xing knew a good hunter.

So the girl tied the cloth around her waist and ran down the hill to the edge of the village, where Tang the master painter, lived, calling out softly, “See me, Mother? I’m going to visit Master Tang.”

The master sat outside in his courtyard under the tangled branches of a willow, smoothing the hairs of his paintbrushes. The yellow finches in the cage that swung above his head twittered to the sounds of the large arrow bamboo leaves rustling in the breeze. The orchid pots Xing Xing’s own father had made stood grouped together in one corner. Surrounding them were ink green indigo plants. She bowed deeply, then sat on her heels beside the old man.

“Ah, the hunting cloth serves as your belt, Pretty Child,” said Master Tang. “My boy is already in the woods, alas. He will bring home only as much as our household needs.”

Xing Xing kept her breath steady in her disappointment. She had, in fact, guessed the situation, since the slave boy was nowhere in sight. Master Tang’s boy typically stayed by the old man’s side if he was home.

“But I am in need of some assistance at the moment. If an hour’s labor interests you, I could offer you a sack of polliwogs as your payment.”

Polliwogs swirled in profusion in the rushes at the sides of the slow river that hugged the bottom of the hill near Xing Xing’s cave. Master Tang had a taste for frogs, so every spring he had his slave boy fill outdoor tubs with polliwogs. That way, when they matured, he could eat frogs at the slightest whim, with no wait. The last thing Xing Xing wanted was polliwogs. Watching frogs made her laugh, she couldn’t bear to eat them.

Master Tang had always been good to her, however. He and Father had been friends. And until just a year ago he had been one of her teachers. Before potter Wu moved to this area, no one had heard of an ordinary person getting an education. None of the boys around here was educated, much less the girls. But Wu had his own ways. Some people hadn’t liked him because of that. They said he gave himself airs—he acted as though he thought he was better than they were, when he was nothing but a simple potter. Master Tang wasn’t like that; Master Tang had been Father’s true friend.

“Thank you for the kindness, Venerable Elder.” Xing Xing bowed her head.

“Come.”

Master Tang led Xing Xing inside, to the room where he painted. She knew her task would be to copy a poem onto the master's latest painting. She was good at calligraphy; Master Tang told her she was very good.

Father used to stand over Xing Xing and Wei Ping for hours as they worked on calligraphy. He spoke of the three incomparables—the three perfections: painting, poetry, calligraphy. Master Tang instructed the girls in painting, his wife instructed them in poetry, but Father himself instructed them in calligraphy. Perhaps that was why Xing Xing excelled in the third perfection. When Father was alive, she had worked hard for his approval, much harder than Wei Ping ever had.

After Father died, Wei Ping stopped all her lessons. She'd never wanted those lessons in the first place, and now the pain in her feet broke her concentration, and she couldn't leave the cave anyway. Stepmother was relieved; an educated girl would be harder to marry off. That Xing Xing should continue her lessons alone was out of the question.

Nevertheless, each day when Xing Xing visited Father's grave to say hello and apologize again for not having been at his side when he died, she practiced calligraphy in the dry dirt over the point where she imagined his stomach to be. After all, wisdom resided in the stomach, and she wanted Father's wisdom to refine her motions; she wanted his guidance and approval even more these days than she had when he was alive. Her art had not deteriorated in the period since his death.

Xing Xing sat on the floor now and looked carefully at Master Tang's new painting. In the foreground was a home on a cliff with a pear tree in blossom; in the background, a bay cradled by mountains. This was a scene from the long, long coastline that Xing Xing had never seen. Master Tang had once lived in a coastal town near where the Yangzi River emptied into the huge ocean. He painted from memory.

Xing Xing unlocked the closet where Master Tang kept all the supplies. She took out, first of all, the inlaid box that held the top-quality inkstone, then the ink, then, for visual harmony, the same brush that Master Tang had used to paint this picture. There was an old pear tree in Master Tang's courtyard right near the cassias. She went to stand by it and opened her nostrils, letting the fragrance of the flowers float inside her, before she took the cap off the paintbrush.

For the next hour Xing Xing dipped that finest brush in the blackest ink mixed on that most beautiful inkstone, and with loving care, she copied the poem on Master Tang's painting. She wrote between the mountains and the bellied sails of a boat at sea. They were not words in the sky or in the sea—ridiculous thought—they were words simply in space. If a painting called for words, as most did, there was always a space that held those words perfectly. Father had taught her that, for she had sometimes added words to the bowls or vases he made.

She sang the poem to herself as she worked. It was brief, but every poem was worthy of extreme attention, and this one pleased her very much:

Pear blossoms fall soft white

Recalling snow past beyond sight

Revealing warmth ahead in sun's light

The poem, Xing Xing knew, came from the mouth of Master Tang's only remaining wife, Mei Zi, the wife who had instructed both Xing Xing and Wei Ping in poetry and whose hands were too twisted with arthritis now to be entrusted with a painting. The girl hoped that the warmth ahead in summer sun would hurry and ease the old woman's suffering.

Xing Xing's first thought was to free the polliwogs Master Tang had given her into the spring-fed pool near her home, but then she thought of the beautiful fish in that pool. A mature frog could eat a fish that size.

She changed directions and went instead to the river rushes, where she opened the small sack and watched the polliwogs gleefully escape. They had four legs already, but their tails still remained—frog, but not yet fully frog.

Then she headed for the woods. If she was lucky, she'd pass Master Tang's slave boy and beg him to catch her at least a few quails. The boy was clearly sweet on her. He gaped whenever she passed. Xing Xing did nothing to encourage his attentions. Her life was far too busy with obeying Stepmother and caring for Father's spirit to think about such things yet. Whenever the boy did her a favor, she always made sure she did him a favor in return, so as never to be beholden to him. But she didn't expect to be lucky enough to pass him in the woods now. One of the reasons the boy was such a good hunter was that he could move so silently and swiftly that the animals didn't realize he was near. It wasn't likely that Xing Xing would be able to detect him.

She walked quietly herself, but in order to be that quiet, she had to move very slowly.

Faint squeals came from somewhere close off to the right. Xing Xing held her breath and followed the sounds.

In a clearing at the foot of a large pine was a raccoon kit. Another came squealing behind it. And a third scabbled out from under a scrub bush.

Xing Xing looked around quickly. Kits this young would undoubtedly still be under the care of a mother, and mother raccoons were fierce. She stooped and picked up a rock, more for protection than anything else. No sensible hunter would kill a mother before her young could survive on their own.

The mother didn't come, however. And soon enough Xing Xing realized things were amiss. The kits stumbled around, but not in the fashion of babes just learning to walk. Rather, they walked fine, but they tripped over rocks and knocked into the trunk of the pine. The girl came closer, checking over her shoulder for the mother.

The kits stopped, their noses twitching. They'd caught her scent. Now they ran in panic in three directions, falling and slamming into things as they went. Why, they were blind!

The poor things. They'd never survive on their own. And that's why the mother was nowhere around, of course. She must have realized something was wrong and simply left them to their fate.

Xing Xing stopped moving.

Within minutes, the kits squealed again. After all, if the strange scent had been a mortal threat, it would have attacked by now. They grouped together, linked by sound and scent.

If she abandoned them, as the mother had done, they'd be dead by evening. Sooner, probably. They were meat to any passing carnivore no matter what Xing Xing did.

Wei Ping needed meat.

Xing Xing untied the hunting cloth from around her waist. She put the rock in it and slung it hard at a kit. The little thing didn't even let out a cry. But the thump of the rock scared the other two. They screamed and ran in circles.

Xing Xing wiped at her nose, which always ran when she was sad. It was unnatural to kill babies, but ~~made no sense not to kill these. In fact, a swift death with a stone was more humane than letting them~~ be ripped limb from limb by a wolf. She took the rock and slung it hard at another kit. It missed the mark. She fetched it before she lost her resolve and slung it again. The kit fell dead.

Xing Xing picked up a dead kit in each hand. Then she sank to her knees, her arms as limp by her side as the small bodies in her hands. "Mother," she called out. "Stay with me, Mother."

The spirit of her mother brushed her cheeks. The girl closed her eyes and let the spirit brush her eyelids, her ears, her temples, her lips.

Now the spirit brushed the back of her right hand. It took a nip. Ouch.

Xing Xing opened her eyes. The third kit had gone from testing her hand to nosing his dead brother. If she didn't stop him fast, he'd turn cannibal.

Xing Xing let herself fall onto the live kit, so that he was caught under her pelvis. She quickly closed her skirts around him, trapping him there with one hand, while she gathered up the hunting cloth and the two dead kits with the other.

Stepmother's eyebrows, which always arched high in the thinnest of pencil lines, arched even higher at the sight of the dead kits. But when she realized the live kit was blind, she nodded in silent accord. She opened an old birdcage on the floor, and Xing Xing guided the kit into it.

"We'll feed him, and when he's big and plump, we'll eat hearty," said Stepmother.

"No, no. It's better that he should be a pet," said Wei Ping. "I can play with him."

"Wild creatures make poor pets," said Stepmother, but she spoke hesitantly. Xing Xing watched the conflict in her face. Pain rendered her daughter practically a prisoner these days; indeed, the girl was still sitting on the *kang*, where she'd been since she woke. She needed amusement—anyone could hear that in the strain of her voice. Stepmother got the knife and set to cleaning the two dead raccoon kits.

Without being told, Xing Xing went outside for fresh water, this time taking only the medium-size pail. She made a quick diversion to Father's grave first, so that she could tell his spirit about the raccoon kits—about how hard it was to kill them and how small the remaining one was, how very dear. As she talked, she tenderly brushed away leaves that had fallen on the grave and creepers that were starting to grow across it. Sparrows twittered, magpies raucously clamored, thrushes warbled. The birds let her know that Father understood.

She scooted back to the path and hurried down to the pool. She dipped the pail in the water and, oh, what on earth had happened? She stared. The beautiful fish swam in the pail. Xing Xing laughed. "You're so lovely," she said. "White as a peony." The peony was Xing Xing's favorite flower, because it had been Mother's favorite flower.

She splashed a little water on the dirt at her feet and picked up a stick to draw with. She wrote her own poem:

Fins like red clouds at sunset

Eyes like gold tears of joy, sparkling wet

White fish in cold water, happily met

Then she tipped the pail till it emptied, for who could catch such loveliness? But when she refilled the pail, the fish swam into it again. She emptied it and refilled. Once more the fish swam into the pail.

It would be unwise to ignore such insistence. So Xing Xing carried home the pail. But before she entered the cave, she hid the pail behind a boulder and went straight into the back of the cave to the small room with a ceiling so low that you had to crawl within it. That's where Stepmother stored the few bowls and pots remaining from Father's working days. Every now and then she sold one. That was their sole source of income. Stepmother said that Wei Ping would be married before the storeroom was empty, though, so they had no cause for fear. Wei Ping's husband would take care of all of them. And if by some mistake of chance the storeroom emptied prematurely, there were other solutions.

Xing Xing fervently hoped a husband would come for her half sister soon, for she knew of the most likely other solution: Stepmother would sell her, and with the money, she could buy a younger girl to help around the cave and still have enough left over to wait for a husband for Wei Ping. Though Xing Xing's life had been reduced to hardly more than that of a slave girl since Father's death, she feared being sold. She was clearly a young woman, and at her age slavery could mean the very worst fate for a female.

So Xing Xing moved within the black air of the storeroom with the utmost care. It would never do to

break a bowl. Her blood banged in her temples. She shouldn't be taking such a risk for a fish. Yet memory urged her on. Her fingers played on every object till she found exactly the bowl she sought, the one with the scalloped edges.

She backed out of the storeroom, clutching the bowl to her chest. When she emerged, Stepmother was there, waiting.

"What could this mean?" she asked in anger. "Am I to change your name from 'Lazy One' to 'Wicked One'?"

Xing Xing bowed. "Amusement for my sister," she said. She ran past Stepmother and brought back the pail. Then she filled the bowl with water and scooped the fish from the pail into the bowl.

"What nonsense is this?" asked Stepmother.

"Let me see," called Wei Ping.

Xing Xing carried over the bowl and set it on the *kang* beside her half sister.

Sunlight danced on the bowl's enamel, where brilliant yellows and greens and reds played out the legendary story of the carp at Dragon Gate. The yellow carp fight their way upstream in spring. Some of them try to leap Dragon Gate. According to common belief, a tremendous storm follows this fight and sets afire the tails of those bravest fish that succeed, turning them into dragons. The outside of the bowl pictured a frenzy of jumping fish; the inside, the blaze of a single dragon. And in the very center of the inside was one word, which Xing Xing herself had written: *li*. Saying that syllable with the tone of the voice dipping and then rising in pitch, it meant "carp"; saying that same syllable with the tone of the voice falling from a high to a low pitch, it meant "advantage." The spoken word was a pun about the story illustrated on the bowl, and Xing Xing had thought of it herself, much to the delight of her Father, who was a master of puns.

"Look at the fins on this fish," said Wei Ping. "They're red already. This fish wants to become a dragon." She smiled.

Xing Xing could hardly remember the last time Wei Ping had smiled.

"Struggle has its rewards," said Stepmother. And she looked at Xing Xing with approval.

Xing Xing could not remember Stepmother ever having looked at her with approval. Inside her head she thanked the lovely fish.

Xing Xing sat in the dark under the stars. Father used to say this habit cleansed the mind and formed base for the understanding of things. She was in need of understanding.

Stepmother's look this afternoon had unnerved her. She wanted to see that look again. It had been a long time since Xing Xing had felt anyone cared for her.

She missed that terribly, for her parents had been devoted to her, despite the fact that she was born a girl. Her mother used to say that Xing Xing was precious and dazzling, her "Sparkling One." That's why she had named her Xing Xing, meaning "stars." And her father had taken great pride in her cleverness.

When Xing Xing's mother lay dying of the illness that twisted her insides and made her cough blood she said that her *hun*, her spirit, would always protect Xing Xing. And she had asked her daughter for one promise, one promise only: that Xing Xing would take care of her father's needs better than anyone else for the rest of his life and that she would be the one to eventually listen to her father's final words.

Stepmother heard the request and sucked in her breath loudly in disapproval. Such bald talk of feelings between parent and child was not traditional. The whole thing was shameful, scandalous.

Father heard as well, but he didn't care one bit about scandal. He insisted that the deathbed wish be respected. From that point on, Xing Xing alone served Father his meals and washed his hair and feet and sang to him in moments of sadness.

This was the start of Stepmother's distaste for Xing Xing—at least, so far as the girl could tell. With each passing year, Stepmother's jealousy of her grew until, in the end, the woman hardly looked at her without curling her lip. Xing Xing was never certain why Mother had made her deathbed wish. Surely she had to know that it would gall Stepmother to see Xing Xing taking on these wifely duties. Maybe Mother had feared that after she was no longer around to protect her daughter, Xing Xing would become as unimportant as she actually did become after Father died—especially if Stepmother had gone on to have a son. Xing Xing could never know.

But at least one very good thing for Stepmother came out of the strengthened bond between Father and Xing Xing: She grew closer to her own daughter. She had not treasured Wei Ping before. Indeed, the girl used to be called "First Child," nothing more. Stepmother was fond of repeating the popular saying "Better one deformed son than many daughters wise as Buddha." In both cities and villages, newborn girls were often thrown away, their bodies eaten by dogs and rats. Xing Xing's mother had been fragile and vulnerable, whereas Stepmother was always strong and large. So no one had expected Xing Xing's mother to be a good breeder—no one was surprised or disappointed that she had only one child, and a girl, at that—but everyone had expected Stepmother to be an exceptional breeder. The woman simply assumed she'd have son after son. It was fortunate that Stepmother had not thrown away her daughter like others had done, for though she worshipped the White-Robed Guan Yin all her married life, the goddess brought her no son. In fact, no other children at all. When Xing Xing's mother died and left her in charge of Father, Stepmother turned to her daughter for comfort and finally gave her a real name.

Xing Xing understood all of that. And she was sincerely happy to see Wei Ping cherished at last. But, oh, how she wanted to be cherished too, cherished like she used to be.

And how she wanted to laugh with someone. Father used to tell jokes. She laughed with him all the time. ~~But Stepmother had no sense of humor, nor did Wei Ping.~~

Still, she should be grateful. After all, Father was unfortunate enough to be the last of his family, and Mother's family would never take in a girl relative. Xing Xing was lucky Stepmother had not turned her out. Maybe with time, Xing Xing's obedience would impress her and the woman would come to care a little for her stepdaughter.

From a jujube tree nearby came the sound of scratching. The kit was clawing noisily at the spokes of the birdcage that kept it both safe and imprisoned. When Wei Ping had gone to bed, Xing Xing had hung the cage there on the chance that the raccoon, a naturally nocturnal animal, would recognize night even in his blindness and make so much noise inside that he'd wake everyone up. Her mouth opened softly in interest at his activity now. The kit couldn't be hungry, for Wei Ping had fed him continually whenever he woke all afternoon. The little creature turned out to be a glutton for boiled soybeans.

Xing Xing fingered the hole that the kit had made in her skirt as she'd carried it home today. What terrible thing could a person do in one life to make it come back in the next as a blind raccoon kit? She shivered, alone on the rock ledge, in the black.

But then she dipped a hand in the bowl of cool water beside her. The beautiful fish sucked at her fingertips. She knew it would. Carp are funny like that. And it wasn't hunger that made the carp do that either, for Wei Ping had also fed the fish all afternoon—bits of dried apple and wine-saturated dates. What wonderful thing could a person do in one life to make it come back in the next as a marvelous white fish with red fins destined to become a dragon?

She waved her wet fingers in the air, painting on the night. Master Tang always said painting that didn't ask for calligraphy was silent poetry, expressing feelings that couldn't be put into words. Xing Xing filled the sky with her fluttering fingers.

The next month in the cave passed in a new balance, almost a harmony. Both the raccoon and the fish grew so steadily that Stepmother named the first Zhang Yi—Growth One—and the second Zhang Er. She threatened continually to kill them for a feast, but it was said in teasing, for her eyes betrayed her satisfaction at Wei Ping's vigorous objections—finally the girl was taking an interest in something again. Xing Xing never entered the fray, but stood behind her half sister in silent support. Both girls had grown terribly fond of the kit and the fish.

In their union against Stepmother's threats the girls found a comradeship they'd never known before. Wei Ping was no longer jealous of Xing Xing for being loved by Father, given that now she was the only loved one in the cave. And Xing Xing couldn't harbor jealousy toward Wei Ping because her foot pain was so pitiable, though Stepmother still allowed no one to talk about that.

Stepmother spent a lot of time away from home these days, renewing friendships with women she hadn't visited for years. During Father's lifetime her friends had shunned her: They accused her of aspiring to a higher social class. Now she made every effort to show them that she was still the same woman she used to be and that her daughter, Wei Ping, would make a suitable wife for a man of the social class a potter's daughter belonged to rightfully. She painted her face red and white, penciled in her eyebrows, anointed her hair with pork fat to make it stand in peaks on the back of her neck, shook bells out the window to scare demons away from the home in her absence, and headed to the village. Xing Xing watched her slow progress, her round body formless within the loose pants and long sackcloth of mourning that came well below her knees. Her gait was unsteady as she hobbled on the heels of those small feet.

Once as the girls watched Stepmother leave, Wei Ping said, "See the swing of her hips, see how sexy she is. I'll walk like that soon."

But that gait tired Stepmother out, and sometimes she came home carried on the back of a peasant man whom she'd reward with a slip of paper money.

Twice she had brought home old women who made a profession of being go-betweens for marriage—they found husbands for young girls. But both had taken one look at Wei Ping's long feet and declared her not marriageable to a man of their social class, so they'd been dismissed. Stepmother continued her visits to friends, hoping she'd come across a more amenable go-between in the process.

The half sisters therefore had long hours alone together. In that time Xing Xing scrubbed the stone wall behind the stove till it shone. She swept the floor. She straightened all the bowls and jars on the tables against the far wall. She cleaned the picture over Wei Ping's bed that had the characters saying *Fine beauty and great wealth*, meant to invite luck. She gathered firewood. She emptied the chamber pot onto the dung heap behind the cave. She did all the chores she'd always done. But still there was time, and since Wei Ping was alone, Xing Xing stayed at home rather than going to tend to Father's grave. The half sisters soon came to confide in each other.

"Maybe you should sleep with your feet raised on a pillow," whispered Xing Xing as the girls sat on the *kang* one morning feeding the beautiful fish from their hands, while Stepmother was outside examining the jujube trees, which were now thick with green dates. "When my feet hurt, it helps to raise them. Instead, you hang yours over the bed, which seems the very worst thing to do."

"No, no," said Wei Ping. "I hang my legs over the bed so that the pressure of the bedstead behind my knees will dull the pain. You have no idea how bad it is." She clenched her teeth, and saliva made

them shine like pearls. She clutched the calves of her legs, stretched out on the warm *kang*. “But I think it’s working. They look smaller, don’t they?”

“Yes, smaller.” Xing Xing said this without conviction, however, for the bandages on her half sister’s feet were large and unrevealing. They also were stinking and seeping—it was time for their periodic soaking in hot water and cleaning in the river. To hide the doubt in her eyes, Xing Xing looked down into the bowl on her lap. The beautiful fish had grown so much, it could barely turn around. She’d have to crawl into the storeroom and find something bigger—a pot for holding large plants, perhaps.

“And my nose,” said Wei Ping, lifting her chin and turning her head so Xing Xing could see a full profile. “My nose is small, don’t you think?”

“Very small,” said Xing Xing. “And you are as slender as a man’s dream.”

“I am, aren’t I? Even wearing our loose dresses, anyone can tell I have a fine form. I’m going to get married. I’m going to have sons.” Wei Ping’s eyes glistened. “So it’s worth it.” She gently petted the tummy of the sleeping raccoon that lay on her upper legs, stretched from her crotch to her knees, on its back, all four legs in the air. Since the kit had grown to full size, its position seemed that much more comical. Its mouth hung open in sleep, and its strong, pointed teeth formed a satisfied smile. Wei Ping and Xing Xing both smiled too. “Yes, it’s worth it,” said Wei Ping again with quiet determination.

“What’s worth it?” said Stepmother, coming into the coolness of the cave.

“Are the jujube trees productive this year?” asked Wei Ping, steadfastly ignoring her mother’s question.

“Very.” She handed a hard green nugget to Wei Ping.

“But why did you pick one so soon?” asked Wei Ping. “They don’t taste good till they turn red.”

“I’m going to sell them,” said Stepmother.

Wei Ping’s forehead pinched in alarm. “We never sell our dates. Are we already desperate? Do you think I won’t find a husband before Father’s pottery runs out?”

“Of course you’ll find a husband.”

“No. You’re afraid I won’t.” Wei Ping’s voice rose to a thin shiver. “You could marry again, Mother. You’re still attractive, and your feet are so small.” Her words came with a frenzied speed. “And since Father has no other family left, your second husband would have to allow us to accompany you into the new marriage. Then we’d have more time for my feet to grow small—more time to find a husband for me.”

“Hush!” Stepmother looked stricken. “How can you talk to your mother like that? Your father, even with all his crazy ideas, wouldn’t have stood such insubordination. Hush!”

“Please, Mother.” Wei Ping’s voice got very quiet. The hysteria was gone now. “Marry again,” she breathed.

“Widows of decent families do not remarry. You know that. It is a small matter to starve to death but a large matter to lose one’s virtue.”

“I don’t want to starve to death,” said Wei Ping.

“And you won’t,” said Stepmother. “You’ll never know that kind of hunger. Nor will I lose my virtue.” She twisted her neck, looking this way and that in worry. “I would never abandon the Wu family ghosts,” she said loudly.

“Then what will we do?”

“That’s what I’ve come to tell you. You will have a husband soon. The dates will ensure that.”
Stepmother sat down on the *kang* between the girls. “You know the benefits of red dates, of course.”

“They invigorate one’s spleen and benefit the kidneys,” said Wei Ping.

“Yes, and that’s when they are ripe. Think how much more beneficial they must be when green. All that goodness is concentrated in the bitterness, before the sugars of maturity.”

“How do you know that?” asked Wei Ping.

“The spirit of my mother told me.”

Xing Xing touched Stepmother’s wrist involuntarily in awe. The woman recoiled. Xing Xing blinked her apology. Mother spirits never lie. And Stepmother’s mother had understood much about medicine. Xing Xing looked with new appreciation at the green date in Wei Ping’s hand. The tiny fruits on their jujube trees were as valuable as agates.

Stepmother stood up. “Xing Xing will pick them and sell them to a *jiang hu lang zhong*, a barefoot wandering doctor, who will use them to cure all kinds of illness. I heard last night that there is one visiting the village beyond ours, down the river valley.”

“And how will that help get me a husband?” asked Wei Ping.

“Xing Xing will tell the *lang zhong* to let all his healed patients know that you were the source of the recovery, that you are the one who understands the virtues of plants. Every man values a woman with such gifts. He’ll advertise you over the whole province. Word-of-mouth propaganda is the most useful.”

“But I know nothing of plants,” said Wei Ping.

“What flowed from my mother to me should naturally flow to you.”

“It doesn’t seem to have done so,” said Wei Ping.

“It will, soon enough. Besides, once you’re married, will it matter?” Stepmother didn’t wait for an answer. She pulled the large basket from the corner. “Time for work, Lazy One.”

Xing Xing put the bowl holding the fish on the *kang*, grateful for the opportunity to bow her head so Stepmother couldn’t see the shock on her face at what she’d just said: “will it matter?” Stepmother had never before expressed explicitly such crass acceptance of deceit. Was Wei Ping also hiding her face?

As Xing Xing leaned over the bowl she looked sideways at the sleeping raccoon. Whenever it woke, it was immediately hungry. And if she wasn’t there to keep guard, its sense of smell could lead it to the beautiful fish. Just at that moment, as though the raccoon was responding to Xing Xing’s thoughts, the skin above his nose wrinkled and he sniffed without waking. So she set the bowl inside the basket and carried it outside with her to the jujube trees, singing little comfort songs to the beautiful fish as she walked.

Xing Xing sat high in a jujube tree and stuck her fingers in her mouth to soothe them. She'd gathered the dates last autumn, but the job had been much easier then. She'd simply strung nets under the trees and beaten the branches with a stick. The ripe fruit dropped easily. But these green fruits had to be wrested individually from their stems. Her fingers were sore already, and she was only on the second tree of five.

It was hard to find a comfortable perch in the thorny branches. Last year Xing Xing's body had still been childlike. Now her sensitive chest and soft thighs kept getting jabbed. This was a more unpleasant task than she'd expected.

A scream sheared the air. It was like none she'd ever heard before, and it came from the cave. In her haste to get down, she fell from the tree, opening a wide gash on her forearm.

The air was filled with multiple screaming voices now—Wei Ping and Stepmother together, as well as inhuman screams that Xing Xing realized must be coming from the raccoon. She ran as fast as she could, straight into the cave, and slipped in blood slime. At first she thought it was the blood that dripped from her own elbow, but then she saw brains and lungs and intestine and fur—all that remained of the blind raccoon kit. The stick he'd been bashed to death with lay in the midst, bits of innards clinging to it. Stepmother's blood-spattered face looked crazed as she ripped at the shredded bandages on Wei Ping's left foot. The girl had both hands in her hair and howled at the ceiling, throwing herself around.

"Hold her tight," shouted Stepmother to Xing Xing.

Xing Xing grabbed Wei Ping from behind and looked over her half sister's shoulder in horror as the bandages came away. The unnaturally arched foot that Xing Xing had seen before was now missing the two biggest toes.

"Devil raccoon," spat Stepmother. "Teeth like knives. At least he died in pieces, so his spirit will never be whole. Go for fresh water, Lazy One. Run."

Xing Xing grabbed the bucket and pole and practically flew down the hill to the pool. She was back, panting, faster than she'd ever moved before.

Stepmother washed Wei Ping's feet—the mutilated one and the whole one—rubbing off the dead skin and kneading them more fully into the desired shape. With her thumbs, she worked in pulverized alum. "My baby," she murmured as she pressed, "my sweet baby." There was no blood from the hole where exposed bone showed. Xing Xing stared at the ragged bone ends.

"You'll be fine," said Stepmother. "You'll be fine." Her voice changed the second time she said those words. It sounded weak and strangely without emotion. "We have to hurry and bandage your feet before your blood has a chance to circulate there again," she said. "If we dawdle, you will bleed badly and the pain will be more terrible than you've ever dreamed. It will be savage. You'll wish you were dead."

Why was Stepmother saying such things? Xing Xing wanted to put her hands over Wei Ping's ears.

Wei Ping said nothing. She merely wept softly, her head heavy on her own chest. She breathed with difficulty.

"Your left foot will be smaller than your right now," said Stepmother.

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