The Doctor’s Daughter

Shao-Pin Luo

You won’t find a new country, won’t find another shore.
This city will always pursue you. You will walk
the same streets, grow old in the same neighborhoods,
will turn gray in these same houses.
You will always end up in this city.

– Constantine Cavafy, ‘The City’

The hospital of this provincial southern city sat right on the bank of the Xiang River, the largest tributary of the mighty Yangtze.

‘It’s a dare!’ he said. ‘I dare you to go in there!’

The door was a black hole, through which one could glimpse a white sheet glinting in the darkness. She stared into the void, held her breath, and walked in. It was eerily quiet, unlike the night before, when the wailing went on all night.

Her friend Fatty, who was really thin as a rail, had come with her to the morgue, only metres away from her house, and built like a pavilion with a curved rooftop and green tiles. Indeed, in the local Hunan dialect, it was called a luotiting, breath-dropping pavilion. It had become a ritual now: every time a patient died in the hospital, they went the next day. Last week, it was an old woman. Today, a young boy: She did not know how he had died, or of what cause; his face was translucent even against the pale sheet that covered the rest of his small body.

‘Are you all right?’ Fatty called anxiously from outside. ‘Xiao Ling! Are you coming out?’

There was nothing to be frightened about really. She was quite used to cadavers, bones, and blood. Intensely curious about the mysteries of the human body, its tissues and tendons underneath the skin, she frequently followed her father to his laboratory where he demonstrated to his medical students the art of suture and dissection. Fatty had been one of the stranger cases. His mother, a nurse in the hospital, had been pregnant with twins, but somehow one fetus grew attached to the other, and the baby was born with his twin inside him. Children had made merciless fun of the boy with a baby in his belly, and called him Fatty. Her father had to operate on him to take out the grotesque tumour with tiny teeth and black hair.

It was cool and peaceful in the morgue. She wondered how it would feel to touch the soles of the boy’s small feet.

It was odd growing up in a hospital, where her father was a surgeon and her mother an obstetrician. All the nurses and doctors lived in provided housing in the residential compound adjacent to the infirmary buildings. This was the largest western medicine hospital in the city, although there was a separate Chinese medicine department with its own pharmacy where the herbal medicines were kept in a hundred little drawers. The foremost surgeon in the city since his twenties, her tall, slim, and handsome father was given a rather austere and awesome nickname ‘First Knife’ by his colleagues and patients. He had long, graceful fingers like a pianist’s, nimble at the operating table, but he would not kill a chicken for food. He always brought home for her the used, tiny surgical scalpels, and she would be the envy of her
schoolmates with her beautiful paper cuts done with the precision of those knives.

The family was allotted only a three-bedroom apartment on the top floor of one of the many identical grey-looking four-storey residential buildings, albeit with a sizable balcony overlooking the river. Mother filled the balcony with spider plants and morning glory flowers, while she spent many hours looking dreamily across the river, trying to discern the misty hills in the distance. Sometimes, when it was too hot to sleep indoors, they placed bamboo beds on the balcony and slept under the stars, with a cool breeze from the river. She would stay wide awake, listening intently to her mother singing Russian folk songs or reading her Pushkin’s fairytale-inverse of the greedy fisher wife making incessant demands on her poor husband who caught a golden fish in the sea. People always slept on balconies or roofs on warm summer nights, and it felt almost like a communal pyjama party.

A subtropical city, it was so swelteringly hot and humid that water oozed through the ground and seeped from walls. Walking was more like swimming through heavy moist air: one emerged drenched in sweat. Then, there was the incessant rain. She liked watching the thin silvery lines streaming down from the sky, the sound of rain chiming the sound of time, drip drop, drip drop. Many years later, remembering the rain of her childhood, she would point out to her students that Yeats used the verb ‘drop’ to describe how peace descended, like rain, ‘dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings.’

Outside the boundary of the hospital was the long, narrow, cobble-stoned Wenxi Jie, or West of the Temple Street, on which was an elegant Confucius temple with a green-tiled roof and red-painted doors. It had been converted into a Teacher’s College, and she often wandered inside its perfumed gardens and cherry orchards. She became best friends with the son of an English professor, who was transferred or ‘exiled’ to this provincial town from the Foreign Languages Institute in the capital Beijing because of something or other that he had written or said or simply taught. He was very fond of his son’s little companion. Every time she came to visit, he would teach her English phrases and praise her flawless pronunciation, and there would be sweet little French pastry cakes that could be found nowhere in the shops. His wife, a professor of French literature, would read to the children short stories by Guy de Maupassant or Flaubert’s _Madame Bovary_. The children understood only vaguely the professors’ longing to escape the boredom and banalities of provincial life.

On hot summer days everyone loved to swim in the river. Her father and brother were strong swimmers who could effortlessly swim from one side to the other. She would watch in delight as her father skipped stones on the river bank, and excitedly count the swirling, widening rings in the water. But she was inexplicably afraid of the water. Her father tried again and again to teach her to swim – every other child in the hospital knew how, but she stubbornly refused to learn, claiming that she would get nasty cramps in her legs and without a doubt drown if she ventured into the water. All she would ever do was to sit on the bamboo river rafts and dip her toes gingerly in the water, watching the fishing boats and commercial ferries sail by. But she loved going on boat trips, sometimes to the provincial capital Changsha – Long Sand, a hundred miles up the river, and occasionally her parents took her and her brother on the ferry across the river for picnics in the cool green hills.

The river was quiet and picturesque until it ran wild and wicked. It flooded annually: in early summer the rushing waters would swell, overwhelming the riverbank. The city built a dyke but people living along the riverbank were reluctant to move. It was cool and convenient to be right on the water; when the river rose they simply moved upstairs.

Every village had its idiot and every street its lunatic; in her city there was the madwoman on the river. She had a haggard face and dirty, matted long hair and lived alone at the very end of

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the row of houses on the riverbank. Every day she sat by her house on the river singing in her high-pitched voice, and sometimes she tried to harm herself by poking and stabbing herself violently with a metal coat hanger. Then there was the portly janitor who stood guard at the main gate to the hospital and exchanged banter with passersby, yet something sinister seemed to lurk beneath his jocular manner. Suddenly one day, he was dead, his body sunk deep under the river rafts. It was a monstrous sight when his body, now a bloated mess, was finally brought up on a stretcher. Everybody flocked to the riverbank to watch. Years later, she would ask her parents what had happened to him that night. Her father told her that it was a suicide. Long ago in his youth, he had belonged to a national youth group that opposed the Communists. The threat of exposure and humiliation, and sheer terror, had driven him into the dark waters. Her mother asked how she could have remembered such an event, since she was barely five or six years old, but how could she ever have forgotten?

Another privilege of being the surgeon’s daughter was that she could tag along for a ride in an ambulance, no matter that she suffered from terrible motion sickness. She vomited after each ride, miserable tears flowing down her small flushed cheeks. But time after time, she answered the siren’s beguiling calls, and went racing through the city streets with her father, in darkness or daylight.

Her father had lost his father to illness when he was only seven years old, and had been raised by a granduncle, a bishop in a Catholic church which also ran a hospital. That was where her father had first become interested in medicine. Sometimes, he operated for many hours without any break, swallowing liquid food while at the operating table and coming home with legs completely swollen from standing for long periods of time. In the evenings, father would let her sit on his lap, guide her small fingers along the anatomical contours of various human organs in his thick medical books, and mesmerize her with the story of the remarkable Madame Curie. She knew then that she wanted to go to university and become a scientist.

Both parents worked long shifts and were on call all the time, so domestic hours were erratic. She did not mind. On hot and hazy afternoons after school she would doze languidly, occasionally reminding children playing outside to be quiet because her mother had worked a long night shift, and always, always listening to the incessant chorus of the cicadas. There were all sorts of creatures for company, especially the laboratory white mice and red-eyed rabbits. There were also snakes. Once, a nurse had come home to her apartment on the second floor to discover a huge snake coiled in the middle of the living room, having climbed up along a tree branch to slither through her window. Terrified, the nurse screamed for help and two men had come to kill it. She had stood there watching, transfixed, and when one of the men told her that snake gall would give her bright eyes, she looked at the tiny pale green thing like a piece of jade in his hand, squeezed her eyes shut, and swallowed it whole!

What she loved most of all was taking care of her silkworms. Friends gave her sheets of black dots of eggs that looked like sesame seeds, from which larvae emerged after only days. The girls gathered mulberry leaves and watched fascinated the worms burrow through the leaves, eating continuously without stop and at breath-taking speed. After a while, the fattened caterpillars spun thin silky threads and curled into little balls of cocoon. Finally, from a hole in the cocoon emerged the silkworm moth, *Bombyx mori*, its wings ashen white, with pale brown stripes. The children were however less interested in the resultant raw silk than in the metamorphosis in the life cycle of the silkworm from egg to larvae to pupa, to cocoon to moth, all in a matter of weeks.

Mostly she was a rather introverted child, painfully shy and inexplicably weepy: the smallest irritant, the slightest reprimand, would trigger a torrent of tears, cascading down her small round
face. Yet her mother had given her a name that meant Sans Souci, with a character from the Chinese classic novel Dream of the Red Chamber so complicated and rarely used that most people did not recognise it. She was tiny when born, no bigger than a little kitten, and as if reluctant to enter the world, she did not open her eyes until a whole week later. Fragile and sickly, she suffered through one health calamity after another. Being sick meant that she did not have to go to school; her father always said that she spent ‘three days fishing, two days sunning the fishnet.’ But she was perfectly happy not being outside and retreating into her own imaginary world of stories. Or she would pester her mother with endless questions: where did the sun rise from, where did the moon go to, where did I come from, where did the river flow to?

Her happiest times were the summers spent at her grandmother’s village, oddly named Jiangxia, or Down the River, since the village was nestled in the land-locked mountainous region of western Jiangxi province, with no water in sight. Even more peculiar, all her country uncles, aunts, and cousins had names associated with water: the males, Haisheng (born upon the sea) and Shuijing (gold in the water); the females, Shuilian (water lily) and Shuixiu (pretty water). But she was allergic to the water from the village well. As soon as she arrived, a rash flared up, and her small body was instantly covered head to toe in little red itchy bumps. But she was her grandmother’s favourite grandchild, and in turn she loved her dearly. While her parents worked all shifts day and night at the hospital, it was grandmother who fed her milk and porridge spoonful by spoonful, rocking her cradle and singing in her country dialect lullabies that only she could understand.

Grandmother had bound feet, and could not walk very fast. When young she had had a private tutor and had learned to read, and she loved the Peking opera. She knew all the intricate plot lines of the classical operas, and when in the mood, she would put on an embroidered dress and an elaborate hairpin and launch into the famous aria from The Drunken Concubine. Under her influence, the whole family loved going to the theatre and singing together. She was fond of smoking her silvery water pipe even though smoking made her cough and was probably what killed her in the end. But she was stubborn and had a fiery temper. When she became ill, she refused to stay in the city, terrified that her physician son and daughter-in-law, instead of giving her a proper burial, would have her cremated, which horrified her as a Catholic. It was then that grandmother returned to her country home, and she started visiting her during her summer vacations.

It was an eight-hour train journey, and her granduncle would meet her at the remote small train station, still a very long way from the village. He put her like a little kitten in the basket on one side of his shoulder pole, with her luggage on the other side, and carried them all the way to the river, where they caught a ferry. Being cooped up like an animal in a cage made her uncomfortable, and she squirmed and screamed to be let out, insisting that she was old enough to walk on her own legs. Sometimes, she screwed up her face and fibbed to granduncle that she urgently needed to pee and if she were not let out that very instant she would surely wet her pants. But most of the time granduncle ignored her futile protests: how could he let a city girl walk on a dirt road like this and soil her nice leather shoes?

When they finally arrived at the village after the long trek, she struggled free from grandmother’s suffocating kisses and embraces and ran like wild up the nearby hill until she was completely out of breath. She lay down on the grassy slope and watched the clouds go by and the country boys with their enormous bundles of firewood on their backs march in a line back to the village, until she could see smoke rising from the chimneys and knew it would be supper time. Happy and content beyond words, she jumped to her feet, gathering a bunch of wild flowers, and returned to her grandmother and a sumptuous dinner with fresh greens from the

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vegetable garden and fish from the pond.

Sometimes, a married aunt came to take her to her house in a bamboo grove, some distance away from grandmother’s village. They walked for hours, passing chilli pepper fields and rest pavilions. Upon their arrival, dogs barked excitedly and, sensing her nervousness, her aunt put her high up on the bed, away from them. Steaming bowls of noodles then appeared on the table, tucked underneath eggs freshly laid by the chickens, clucking and milling about her. Sometimes her uncle would let her taste the rice wine that he himself brewed. Every three days, there was an enormous country market fair and she would hang on tightly to her aunt's sleeve for fear of getting lost in the crowds. People bartered and exchanged for everything under the sun: vegetables, livestock, pretty blouses for the young women, tools for the men, and assorted knick-knacks for the household.

The Spring Festival was an especially exciting time. Grandmother was revered in the village because she had been educated, had been married in the provincial capital, and had a renowned surgeon for a son. She had seen the outside world and could talk about it. At any festival feast, she was always given an honoured seat, and she of course got to sit right next to grandmother. All the children were given new clothes, colourful padded clothing for the winter, pretty kerchiefs and skirts for the summer, and hand-sewn shoes. And there was always such a lot of food, rice wine and rice cakes, roasted pork and chicken, and varied vegetables. At night, the whole village gathered at the Great Hall around a long burning log. Every two hours the bell was struck, while a group of young men walked around the village, beating on drums and gongs and setting fireworks ablaze, to chase away evil spirits and welcome the New Year and the coming of spring. Warm and snug, she stared in fascination at the dancing flames and fell asleep at her grandmother’s lap.

She was already in university when her grandmother died and after that she had left the country altogether and had never seen her gravesite. But in her heart, it was as if she were still her grandmother’s little girl.

During the evenings, she spent long hours doing homework in her mother’s medical office. She preferred the long, cool white corridors with apple-green borders of the hospital wards to the humid heat and fetid air outside. Sometimes there was a lull in mother’s work, so she would sit with her and read Alice in Wonderland. Mother put on a solemn face and did an imitation of the Queen with a wave of her hand – ‘Off with her head’ – while her daughter intoned ‘curiouser and curiouser,’ and they both burst out laughing. Then, suddenly, a scream from the maternity ward would disrupt their reading, and mother would dash to the delivery room. After a long while, mother would finally emerge through the doors, covered in her white cap and mask. She could see only her tired eyes and beads of sweat on her forehead. ‘It’s time you went home. It’s getting very late,’ mother would say. ‘But I want to see the baby ...’

Outside, the warm night air was full of the sound of crickets.

Every morning, on her way to school, she had to walk along the whole length of the hospital to reach the main gate. She hurried by the main infirmary building, the tallest in the city built by German missionaries, passing rows of gaping windows of the wards, each to her a grotesque picture of disease and death, of bodies in varying degrees of decay, but the patients’ moans and groans inevitably floated after her. She had seen his ghastly face all this week, twisted in agony, his tormented eyes staring at her longingly, as if she could somehow save him from pain and misery. The horror! Shuddering, she quickened her steps, but she could feel those eyes following her, long after she was out of sight. The next time she went by, she stole a glance at him, in his bed by the window. He seemed to be asleep, although a rasping sound escaped from his throat, as he gasped for air, but his weary face looked almost handsome. She began to
dream about him, almost with tenderness. In those dreams, he always appeared cheerful, never in pain, and even whistled at her on her way to school. One day, she brought an azalea branch for him, but he had disappeared from that window, now only an empty space. What did he see from that window, day after day and night after night, as the seasons passed him by? Was he waiting for a sign, a gesture, from her to show that, even in her childish innocence, she saw, felt, and understood his pain and suffering? He seemed utterly alone; no one ever visited him. Did he ever love someone, and did that someone love him in return? She never knew who he was, what he did for a living, where he had come from, or how he had become so ill and from what unforgiving disease he died. She only thought about him with sadness. She was never afraid of him, yet the look from his sunken eyes haunted her even to this day, forever a reminder of decay and of death.

Now she looked carefully, almost lovingly, at this little boy’s pale small face, and brushed her fingers softly against the cool soles of his feet. Life and death: so ordinary, so natural, at the hospital. Every day, babies were born; every night, someone died. Tomorrow, she and Fatty, hand-in-hand, would watch his small body being taken away, and the mourning procession slowly flow through the spring mist and rain of the city’s winding streets, its funereal dirge too solemn for a fragile, tiny life.

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