

CHASING DOWN THE MOON

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LOOK MA NO HANDS

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“To a Mouse.” Robert Burns, 1785

“Blessed Assurance.” Crosby/Knapp, 1873

“Hanson Place.” Robert Lowry, 1864

“Our God, Our Help in Ages Past.” Isaac Watts, 1719

“Barbara Frietchie.” John Greenleaf Whittier, 1864

Translation of poem by Zhou Xuanjin from scholarly resources and multiple translations, copyright 2015 by Carla Baku. For more poetry by Zhou Xuanjin, see *Immortal Sisters: Secrets of Taoist Women*, edited and translated by Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1989)

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PART I
SPARKS

Ignorance is the night of the mind, but a night without moon and star. —Confucius

For man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward. —Job 5:7

BEFORE

September 23, 1881

Dearest Father,

At long last, I have stopped moving long enough to pen a legible letter to you. The steamship from San Francisco made port in Humboldt Bay early yesterday morning, and before I even had time to realize where I was, Aunt Hazel had me settled into my own upstairs room, a cup of tea on the night table and a bath drawn to wash away the soot, sweat, and salt of the past nine days. Whether I'll ever launder it all out of my traveling skirt remains to be seen.

You were right, Papa, that it would be hard travel, but I did love it, even the stark expanses of Utah and Nevada. There were reminders along the way that many had come before us, and under far more wearying modes of travel than a modern rail car. At one place I saw a chifferobe that had long ago fallen from some passing wagon, the wood bleached white as bone. I had to wonder what sorts of creatures were now at home in those shattered drawers—scorpion, spider, snake? Miles on, the whole lot of us were in a grim temper—no surprise, hot and dusted with cinders as we were—and as the train toiled up into the Sierra Nevadas, there commenced some especially black jesting about the Donner Party. I confess to having joined in, which made a woman sitting near me cover the ears of her little boy. I sigh even now to remember her expression and my realization that I had (once again) trampled the invisible line of female propriety that has always been so elusive and troublesome. Will I ever learn?

When we dropped into the Sacramento Valley, there were, as far as we could see, fields of wild sunflowers, their faces no larger than the palm of a man's hand, spread out on either side of the tracks. Our entire company actually broke into hurrahs to see it—California!

Papa, I've nearly emptied the inkwell, and not even begun to tell you about Eureka—it is a rough place, and glorious. I'll write soon and tell you how I'm settling into my adventure. What I miss most, already: brushing the sawdust off your shoulders right before supper. My best love to my best fellow.

Your prodigal,

Rose

CHAPTER ONE

Hunan Province, China, 1883

THE STARVING TIME. Each spring, this is what the people in the village called the lean months, when the best mushrooms were gone from the woods and spring greens had not yet come up. Ya Zhen was sixteen, a slender girl, tall like her father. Her hands and arms were strongly corded from a great deal of physical work. Today she huddled under a blanket, trying to keep her small brother distracted so that he would stop complaining of hunger. She could not stop thinking about an egg, how the yellow yolk would coat her tongue. But the last hen had stopped laying and gone into the pot long ago, feeding them and feeding them, first with parceled bits of flesh, then smoky traces of marrow, and finally broth, diluted a little more each day until it was a sip of hot water infused with the memory of chicken.

The rain was relentless. For weeks, the unbroken wall of water between the river and the clouds had sent the fish into hiding. Their mother sat by the ashes of her cooking fire, hands resting in her lap, palms up. Earlier in the morning she had raked through the cold char, looking for a bit of fish or rice that might have fallen in the fire days before, something she could feed her son. There was nothing. The night before, she had fixed a last bit of porridge and given it to the boy. But there had been no breakfast and now the afternoon mealtime was long since passed.

"Pretend you are a tiger," Ya Zhen said. "You are in your den, hiding from the hunters. Shh," she whispered. "They are so near."

Hong-Tai crouched under the blanket with her, his pupils large in the dark. "I am going to eat the hunters," he said, baring his small, square teeth. He was six years old, tall for his age with a long face and prominent cheekbones, like their father.

"Oh no, it's too dangerous," said Ya Zhen. "There are too many, and they have long arrows. You have to wait. I'll tell you when to come out."

"But I'm hungry, *Tū jā*. I want to eat." He pulled the blanket off his head. Before she could catch him, Hong-Tai jumped off the bed and ran to their mother. "*Mā*," he shouted at her. "Give me food now."

Their mother turned her head slowly, face blank, as if she could not hear him.

"Give me food!" He raised a hand as if to strike. Ya Zhen grabbed his arm and led him outside. The yard was boggy with mud, but the clouds had thinned enough that she could judge the sun's position low in the sky, a luminous gray spot behind the darker gray overcast.

"Let's find worms and try fishing again," she told Hong-Tai. She didn't want to leave her mother alone, but an empty belly compelled her. Their father had left five days ago, down the mountain to try to sell the meager remnants of last year's millet crop. It was the last bag, saved back for seed, but the fields were too wet to plant and he feared the seed would mold if he waited any longer. He had promised to bring back food and should have returned after three days.

"Tigers don't dig for worms," Hong-Tai said. He folded his arms over his chest.

"That's true," said Ya Zhen. "They can't hold a line and pull the fish up, either. Or cook the fish. Tigers never cook."

"Mā will cook the fish for me." He ran to the maple tree at the corner of the hut, broke off a small branch and handed it to his sister. "I'm not really a tiger," he said. "Are the fish hungry now?"

She tapped a finger on top of his head. "Maybe they are."

After a few minutes digging with the branch, they had a writhing ball of red worms in a reed basket. While Hong-Tai gathered damp grass to cover them, Ya Zhen returned to the house for their tackle, a plain bamboo pole strung with twine and hook. Her mother had gone to the bed and curled on her side, facing the wall. Most of her hair had come loose of its knot at the nape of her neck and it trailed out on the bed behind her like weeds floating at the riverbank.

"Mā," Ya Zhen said. She touched her mother's shoulder. "We're going to fish." Her mother did not stir. It had always seemed to Ya Zhen as if her frail mother had one foot in the ghost world. "We'll be careful. I'll keep Hong-Tai with me." She went to the door. "*Bà* will be home soon," she said, almost in a whisper. Her mother's back looked thin as a child's and she did not reply. Ya Zhen could hardly make out the rise and fall of her breathing.

Normally she would cast bits of rice onto the water to tempt fish to the surface, but she had no rice, no millet. She didn't need it. The long rains had indeed made the fish ravenous. She baited her hook and had a fish on the line immediately. The live thrum quivered into her palms and she drew it to shore with the utmost care. After landing three small trout, she let Hong-Tai take a turn. In seconds, he had a strike. "*Tǎ jà*," he shouted, jumping from foot to foot. She helped him pull the fish—a big one, easily twice the size of hers—onto the bank and showed him how to retrieve the hook. He was so excited he cast in again before baiting the line and nearly tossed their pole into the river. They pulled the line in and he turned the fishing back over to his sister, squatting to admire his own catch. After she pulled in a fifth silver trout, Ya Zhen cleaned them on the riverbank, throwing the entrails back into the water and wiping her bloody fingers on a hank of moss. Hong-Tai, still squatting, watched.

"This one for me." He pointed at the largest and smoothed its tail with a grimy finger.

She opened her mouth to tease, to tell him the fish was hers, but his nose ran and his teeth chattered. "Of course," she said. "You can eat it up and get a big belly."

This high in the hills the river ran fast and cold; the flesh of the trout was firm, pink. Ya Zhen's mouth watered and she wanted to bite into the fish raw. She knocked the few remaining worms onto the dirt, wrapped all five fish in clean leaves and tucked them into the basket.

The thin spring sun had dipped behind the peaks, throwing the small valley into early twilight. Her fingers were bright red, numb from the water, and Hong-Tai shivered. She rubbed his arms through the thin fabric of his jacket and proposed they race to see who could get home first to start the fire. He sprinted ahead of her, pigtail bouncing from shoulder to shoulder.

She was ten years older than Hong-Tai and had been a second mother to him from the beginning. Her father, always distant with the girl, had been transformed when his son was born. She could perfectly recall how animated his face became when the midwife brought him news of a male child. It seemed to Ya Zhen that overnight her taciturn father became young, as if his face was lit from inside. He had showered Mā with small affections and gifts and had carried Hong-Tai around so much that the women in the village began to call him *nán yín pú*: little mother.

Climbing the hill, Hong-Tai saw his father first, standing in the open door. "Bà ba!" He ran hard and was caught up into the air, laughing. "I'm hungry, Bà. My belly is angry and Mā wouldn't feed me."

His father set the boy on his feet and smiled down at him. "Go to the table now and see what's there. Your mother has a surprise."

Ya Zhen was right behind Hong-Tai. "Hello Bà," she said. "We have fish for dinner."

His eyes skimmed her face and then looked past her, at the mountain. "Come and eat." He turned and she followed him inside.

A cooking fire now warmed the hut. Ya Zhen's mother poured hot tea, and she had made porridge. On the table were opened parcels of food her father had carried home: rice, with which her mother had made the porridge, and pickled radish to eat with it; strips of salted herring; and sticky buns with bean paste, as if they were celebrating the new year again. Ya Zhen gave the basket of trout to her mother, who was busy filling Hong-Tai's bowl, smiling. It seemed impossible that she was the same woman, earlier left in the bed with her face to the wall.

"See what your father has brought us," she said. "Eat now and I'll cook the fish."

Ya Zhen put food on her plate, her mouth watering when she smelled the pickled vegetable. She went to a low stool near the hearth. The porridge was hot and creamy, and she felt it warming her, filling her belly while she watched her father and brother eating at the table. Hong-Tai tore a dumpling open and licked out the creamy paste. He stuck out his tongue and crossed his eyes trying to see it. Ya Zhen covered her mouth and laughed. She waited for her father's reaction; it seemed she had spent all of Hong-Tai's life, six years, trying to learn something about her father by watching him watch Hong-Tai. She was surprised. He was not looking at the boy, but at her, leaning back in his chair, his unshod feet stretched toward the fire. When she caught his gaze, he looked away, scratching his head.

After they had eaten and the table was clean, her father brought more packages out. The first he gave to Hong-Tai. It was a suit of clothes, the pants and tunic made of heavy brocade, dark blue, and a new jacket, thickly padded with a tall collar that reached the boy's chin.

"Look, Tǎ jà," he said to Ya Zhen. He ran to her and turned slowly, holding his arms out stiffly to his sides, face solemn and pleased.

"You look like the son of the great north wind," she said, running her palm over the satiny brocade. "Very strong and powerful."

Hong-Tai broke into a grin and began to run around the table. "I am the wind. Watch out, I am blowing my cold breath on you!"

"Come here *zǎi*," their mother said. She drew Hong-Tai close and held his face between her palms. "My handsome boy." Hong-Tai leaned against her, looking down at his new clothes. "So much money for the seeds," she said to her husband. "You were shrewd to make such a bargain."

He looked at her levelly, then at Ya Zhen. He pushed the last parcel across the table toward her. "Take this," he said.

Ya Zhen was so stunned by the offer of a gift that she had to look at her mother first, thinking she must be mistaken. Her mother's eyes were large and surprised in the firelight. She nodded at her daughter.

She opened the thin paper carefully, so that it could be used again. There was a garment, brilliant scarlet. Ya Zhen stood and held it up. It was a wedding robe, embroidered with gold thread,

peonies and cranes. The fire glimmered on the patterns. Ya Zhen felt thunderstruck, as if every thought had been swept from her mind. But somehow her body knew; her hands began to tremble and tiny reflections shimmered on the walls of the small room. When her mother moaned, Ya Zhen's knees buckled and she fell back onto the stool hard enough to make her teeth click together.

"This girl is to be congratulated," her father said loudly. "She will soon have a rich husband."

Ya Zhen's mother shook her head in tiny arcs, no no no. She looked from father to daughter, father to daughter, tears beginning to slide down her cheeks. Then she looked at Hong-Tai in his beautiful new clothes.

"No," she said, and caught her son by the arm. "Take it off. We have to give it back."

"Bà!" Hong-Tai howled, pulling away from his mother, stumbling and landing on the floor. He started to cry. "You made me fall," he wailed. "My clothes are dirty."

Ya Zhen's father made two long strides across the room and slapped his wife hard on the face. He was a tall man, as were many men from the north, and Ya Zhen's mother staggered and fell onto the bed, blood on her mouth. Ya Zhen felt rooted to the earthen floor, like an old cypress holding her place in the world by habit. Their father had often spoken roughly to them, but Ya Zhen had never seen him strike their mother. Hong-Tai saw his mother's blood and screamed. He ran to Ya Zhen, buried his face in her neck, weeping.

Her father stood panting, and looked back at Ya Zhen. "Tomorrow you will travel to meet your husband in the south. Take some of this food for your journey." Without looking at her, he told his wife to get up, to help Ya Zhen prepare to leave. "It will be at first light," he said. He picked up Hong-Tai. The boy tried to hold onto his sister, but his father spoke sharply to him. "We will take care of night business now." This meant carrying a last bucket of water from the well, splitting some kindling for the morning fire, and going to the latrine. Hong-Tai looked at Ya Zhen over his father's shoulder as he was carried out. His wet eyes were large in his face.

"Mā," Ya Zhen whispered. Her mother had curled up, just as she had earlier in the day, weeping quietly. The girl stood, fighting the ragged, wobbly sensation in her legs. She found the cloth her mother used to wipe the dishes and wet it in the drinking bucket. "Mā," Ya Zhen said again, pulling gently on her mother's shoulder. Her mother let herself be rolled onto her back like a child. Ya Zhen brushed the hair out of her face and winced at the deep gash on the corner of her mother's mouth. The flesh of her cheek was smeared with blood and was swelling, the perfect outline of her father's hand rising there.

Ya Zhen wiped at the blood as gently as she could. Her mother did not flinch or pull away, but her eyes opened. When Ya Zhen rinsed the cloth and reached out to wipe her face again, her mother gripped her wrist and took the cloth. She sat up and pulled Ya Zhen to her. Ya Zhen could not remember her doing this since she was a tiny child. The strength in her mother's arms surprised her, and she relaxed into the embrace. Her fear filled her like a raw tide, and she allowed herself to weep.

"No, Mā. No, Mā." She said it over and over, and her mother rocked her back and forth. She cried until her throat was raw and she was no longer making real sound, just a keening that she felt in the center of her head. When she had no more strength to weep, she sagged against her mother and simply breathed in the light, earthy smell of her.

"It is not a lucky thing to be born a woman," her mother said. "Your fate will be in the hands of your husband now."

By the time her father brought Hong-Tai back into the hut, nearly asleep on his feet, Ya Zhen's mother had wrapped the girl's few possessions in a bundle: a wooden comb, a second shirt, a small pile of sunflower seeds twisted in a corner of the paper her father had packed the parcels in. She also wrapped the bits of food left over from dinner, and finally the wedding robe. Before she tied everything up, she went to the bed and got on her hands and knees. From far underneath she pulled a small wooden box. It was plain, no scrollwork of any kind, but the finish gleamed like pooled honey. Her mother set the box on the table and lifted the lid. She brought out a pair of chopsticks, polished ebony. On the end of each one was a jade inlay, a meticulous dragon with a small seed pearl eye.

"My mother gave these to me when I married," she said. "They have fed all your grandmothers." She tucked the chopsticks into the bundle and tied it in a snug roll. "This will bring luck," she said.

"But I don't want to go. Please. Don't let him."

"Your husband has already paid."

"I want—"

"You must learn to want differently." Her mother leaned her head close to Ya Zhen's, her face grim. "Now you are the daughter of your husband's mother." The words were so simple, the way she said them, and each one fell like a stone onto Ya Zhen's heart. Her mother took up the broom, swept ashes back into the hearth with her back turned. It seemed to the girl that her mother grew smaller, receding even as she stood in one place, while the little sounds of the stiff bristles making their *whist, whist* raised an impenetrable hedge between them. After what might have been a very long time, or only moments, there were footsteps outside. Ya Zhen's mother touched her own bruised and swollen face.

"Your father is coming. Get in your bed."

All night she lay awake and shaking beneath her blanket. Her father had said she would marry a wealthy man. No wealthy families lived in this village, nor in the village where her mother's aunt lived, most of a day's walk to the east. All her life she had known that her parents would arrange her marriage, but she imagined there would be some warning, that perhaps she would know the family of which she was to become part. In no scenario had she imagined being far from Hong-Tai. What would happen to him when their mother got lost in the ghost world, as she had during their father's absence, which she often did during the dark months of winter? All her life, Ya Zhen had acted as a buffer between Hong-Tai and the temper of their father, distracting the little boy when his demands became wearisome and irritating to the adults. She kept remembering her father, standing over their mother after striking her, panting while his wife bled into her own palm. Would he strike Hong-Tai? Ya Zhen felt as if some vital part of her belly had torn loose from the fear trampling inside her.

Her mother wept off and on during the night, small sounds like a kitten. Once her father spoke softly, and her mother had stopped crying. Long before the first cockcrow, her mother rose, built the fire and put the kettle on. Ya Zhen feigned sleep when her mother shook her shoulder.

"You must wash now, daughter," she said.

Ya Zhen opened her eyes. "I am not your daughter."

Her mother blinked and drew back. Her mouth was less swollen than it had been the night before, but a dark bruise mottled the side of her face and her eyes were puffy from crying. She

smoothed the hair back from Ya Zhen's forehead. "Just for this last morning," she said. "Come and wash for the journey."

She got up, her joints stiff from lying awake all night. The reflection of the small flames leapt up on the earthen walls of the house. Hong-Tai and her father still slept, the little boy's arms and legs flung wide across his mat, his face smooth and careless.

While she poured hot water into a bowl and undressed to her thin undergarments, her mother tied her bedding into a roll. She placed this with Ya Zhen's other small bundle of belongings next to the door. Ya Zhen watched all this from the corner of her eye. She felt that perhaps it was a dream, that she really had fallen asleep in the night and would soon wake to find her mother cooking more rice porridge, Hong-Tai pulling one of her eyelids open as he loved to do when she slept longer than he did. But the rough rag on her face and arms, her own breath steaming from her lips, and now the sound of a rooster from the village—these were not a dream. Her mother stirred millet into a pan, a sense of hurry in all her movements.

Then there were voices and the sound of horses on the road. Her mother looked toward the closed door. She dropped the stirring spoon and rushed to wake her husband.

Later, Ya Zhen remembered the last moments with her family in disjointed blocks of motion. Her father opened the door and went into the yard and Hong-Tai ran out with him. Her mother combed and braided her hair, whispering advice. "Be submissive to his mother. If she likes you, your life will be easier. The first time...after the wedding, you must try to stay calm. There will be a small pain, but a calm spirit will bring you a strong son." She went on and on like this, but Ya Zhen could hardly hear any of her words. All she could hear was the sound of men talking, rough voices, her father placatory and cajoling in a way she had never heard him before. Then he called to her mother to bring Ya Zhen out.

Her feet were so heavy and without feeling, they seemed to have turned to clay. When she crossed the threshold into the early morning, there were two men on horseback. Another man drove an oxcart filled with sacks of wheat and millet, and a barrel of fish, salt bleeding out and coating the sides in crusty white streaks.

One of the horsemen, a lean and muscular man whose expression was flat as slate, dismounted. He motioned at Ya Zhen with one hand. "Bring her here."

Her father clasped her arm and led her forward. The other mounted man and the ox driver looked on, silent. The first man took Ya Zhen by the shoulders and turned her around, looked at the back of her, ran his hands down her back, over her buttocks, and down the length of her legs. Ya Zhen could hear her mother crying again. "Peasant feet," he grunted, for her feet were not bound. He grasped her chin. "Open your mouth," he said quietly. Was this her husband? She tried to catch her mother's eye, until he gave her jaw a small jerk. "Open," he said, scowling. People spoke to misbehaving dogs in such a voice. She opened her mouth. The man hooked a finger inside and pulled, looked at her teeth. Hong-Tai, who had been standing behind his mother's legs, roared and ran at the man.

"Don't hurt my sister!" he shouted. Before their father could stop him, Hong-Tai had thrown a punch at the man's arm. The man knocked him aside and he sprawled in the dirt of the yard.

"Hong-Tai." Ya Zhen lurched toward her brother, but the man had her by the arm, twisting just enough to keep her from breaking free. Their mother lifted Hong-Tai, wiping the dirt off his face with the edge of her sleeve.

Suddenly someone grabbed Ya Zhen from behind and hoisted her, the other horseman. Though not much taller than she, he was powerfully built. He slung her astride his horse and climbed up, clamped an arm around her waist. The first man mounted his own horse and turned for the road.

"Wait," cried Ya Zhen's mother, "her things, her bed." She pointed at the door of the house. Ya Zhen's father, whose face had gone as white as milk, ran for the bundles, even as the group moved out of the yard.

"Throw it in the wagon," said the first man, not looking back.

Ya Zhen's father tucked the two bundles among the sacks of grain, walking alongside as the oxen gathered speed, but did not look at Ya Zhen. This done, he turned his back, shoulders bowed. Hong-Tai bellowed, screaming her name. Her father tried to subdue him, but Hong-Tai slapped his face. Ya Zhen's mother stumbled under the weight of the flailing boy and lost her hold. He tried to run after them, but they were already far down the road and his father caught him and carried him, howling, back to the mud house.

Ya Zhen felt each of his cries like a stroke of lightening in her belly, in the place where the horseman had clamped his hand. She tilted back her head and a cry rose from her gut that sounded like an animal.

"You should save that voice for your wedding night," the horseman said in her ear. "You will be the wife of a hundred men. So much pleasure will surely make you sing." He and the other men laughed. Ya Zhen closed her mouth and tried to stop the violent shaking in her arms and legs.

Two hours outside Ya Zhen's village, the lead horseman ordered them off the road and announced he would be the first to congratulate the new bride. He told her to take off her clothes. When she only stood still, shaking her head, he pulled out a short blade. He grabbed her wrist and made a shallow gash between her fingers. Ya Zhen cried out and held her bleeding hand to her chest.

"This will heal quickly and your new owners will never see the scar," he said. "There are many places on your body like this. I will show you each one unless you do as I say." He waited.

Their faces registered only a species of impassive hunger. All around her the day looked as she might have expected, bright, the sun just skimming through the eastern peaks, the up-and-down song of little yellow-throated birds. In that moment, she understood the nature of her life: an outlier.

They wiped themselves clean with her clothing, and when she couldn't stand or walk, the cart driver pulled her by one arm and heaved her in with the bags of grain. He threw her stained clothes on top of her and climbed into the front of the cart. The ox grunted and the wagon lurched forward. She was so grateful for the air in her lungs, so relieved to be off the ground, her body, even in its pain, belonging to herself again, that she lay silent, heavy as stone. There was no birdsong now, only the sound of grit passing under the wagon's wheels and her breath in, then out.

Come nightfall she was feverish, by turns shaking and burning. The men stopped and made a camp, leaving her in the cart. She had pulled her clothes back on and dragged her bedroll on top of her without the strength to open it, and before she lost consciousness the men argued over her. The lead horsemen said they must be careful or risk losing the rest of their pay when they got her to Guangdong.

"That demon will not pay for her if she is dead," he said in his quiet voice, and that finished the argument.

When the cold shaking swept her, her teeth rattled together like the sound of pebbles in a gourd. This roused her and she stared through the slats of the cart at the fire, wishing she could get closer to warm herself. Then a vast heat ran through her, starting deep in her body, creating a terrible thirst. The lead horseman came to the cart and looked at her lying among the sacks. He gave her a bowl of tea, which she gulped until she choked. When she coughed, she felt more blood soak her trousers and a wave of dizziness knocked her backward. She fainted then. He must have opened her bedroll because she woke some time later with her blanket spread over her. It smelled like the inside of her home, of her mother's cooking fire and the sweet, woody smell of *huo xiang*, the strong herb used to discourage moths. Ya Zhen was surprised to find that this did not make her cry. Perhaps she was too ill or too exhausted. She thought she might be dying and found that even this did not upset her. Her whole body felt hollow as a gallnut because her spirit was ready to fly into the night sky with the sparks rising from the campfire.

She rose and fell through consciousness all night. At one point, she found herself back in the village, sitting above the river in the old camphor tree. Hong-Tai was fishing and she called to him from her place on the branch. But her voice was the small bleat of a cuckoo. He picked up stones and threw them at her, laughing. She burst through the branches and the tiny white camphor flowers showered into his hair. Then it was dark again and the fire gone out, the men asleep. There was deep breathing near the side of the cart and at first she was afraid one of the men watched her in the dark. Then she realized it was the ox, staked nearby. She could see its flank through the slats. She tried to put her hand through and touch the warm hide, but she couldn't reach it. She fell asleep that way, hand and wrist stretched through the staves. Finally there was a trace of light in the sky, but she could not so much as lift her head to look around. Everything in her belly and deep inside where the men had hurt her was a roaring fire.

When the men woke, the lead horseman brought a bowl of water to the cart. Ya Zhen just looked at him and closed her eyes again. He lifted her head and told her to drink. She did as he said, and the water was like cool silk going down her throat, but moments later she vomited it up again. The force of this caused a great searing pain through her lower body that made her want to scream, but she could only gasp like a fish pulled out of the river, clutching her belly, which was hard and hot.

The man's face looked tight and worried. He spoke to the others over the fire while they drank their tea. The second horseman frowned and shook his head; they were engaged in another argument, but Ya Zhen couldn't make sense of what they said. She drifted out of the world again.

The next time she opened her eyes, she was out of the cart, inside a dark room and lying on a pallet. She was naked again and an old woman washed her, dipping and rinsing the rag in a wooden bowl that smelled of red elder flowers. Her skin felt cool. When she tried to lift her head, the woman put her palm on Ya Zhen and pressed her back.

"No, little bud, *mò qī lái*. Don't try to get up." This was an *ēn mā*, a granny shaman from some village. She took a cloth from Ya Zhen's forehead and rinsed it in the bowl, replaced it. The smell was light and sweet and she wished she could drink something that smelled like that. As if reading her mind, the woman brought a cup to her lips. The tea was not sweet, but deeply bitter. She was thirsty, though, and took several deep swallows. Immediately, her body broke out in a hard sweat.

"Good," the woman said, nodding and wiping Ya Zhen's skin again. "This hot wind must blow through you." She rinsed the rag and smoothed it over Ya Zhen's face, the way her mother had when she was very small. Large tears formed at the corners of her eyes and rolled into her ears and hair.

The woman nodded again. "You have come to great pain," she said, "and you will have to bear this burden for a long time." Her gray hair was pulled back severely and was so thin her weathered scalp showed through. The ēn mā smiled. "You are lucky, though." She laughed at Ya Zhen's expression, showing a few worn-down teeth. "Oh yes," she said, as if the girl had contradicted her. "You will not die. You will slide through the bars of your cage, like the shadow of an eel sliding through the water. Here, open your mouth." She held a smooth piece of wood as long as her finger. "Put this between your teeth."

With great care, the woman bent Ya Zhen's knees. Her thighs began to shake and she gripped the edge of the pallet. Slowly, the woman extracted a matted bundle of herbs from inside Ya Zhen's body. The girl ground her teeth into the stick. "Now I put fresh medicine inside. This will draw the fire out." She packed a wad of damp herbs into a thin cloth, wetting it with the elderflower water. "You bite the stick," she said, and Ya Zhen did, until her jaws ached. When the woman finished, the sweat poured off Ya Zhen. The woman wound a soft rag between the girl's legs and around her hips and covered her with a loosely woven sheet of homespun cloth.

"They will take you tomorrow," she said. "I told them I would buy you. I have an extra pig and some chickens—good laying hens. I need help here." She poured the elderflower water into a bucket and threw the fouled bolus on the fire, where it sizzled. "They won't sell. They want gold, and I don't deal in anything I can't eat or grow."

"I have some food," Ya Zhen said. "Where are my things?"

"Everything is right here," said the woman, patting the little bundle under Ya Zhen's head. "I've already eaten your food. You won't be able to take anything solid for a day or two." She tamped something into a small pipe, leaning close to the fire to see. "They didn't bother with it, I know, because they'll take the chopsticks if they see them. Don't let anyone see them."

She lit the pipe and took a breath, blew smoke out her nostrils. Then she took another, and before Ya Zhen realized it, had gently clamped her old lips over Ya Zhen's nose and exhaled. The girl inhaled reflexively. She felt a sensation like warm water break over her, spread into her limbs.

"You'll mend," said the woman, "if they stay off you." She took another speculative draw on her pipe, watching Ya Zhen sleep. She sat on a bench by the fire and stretched her feet out, farted, scratched herself. She pulled a knife from the old pigskin booties she wore, laid it in her lap and began to hum an unnamed cradle song her grandmother had sung to her long decades ago, a song about a foolish man who got into his boat to try and catch the moon. Thinking it was a huge pearl that would make him rich, he chased the moon all night, until it set in the west, and he was forever lost at sea.

They took her in the morning. Before they did, the ēn mā closed the door in their faces so she could speak to Ya Zhen alone. The lead horseman was furious, but when he made threats, she made sport of him.

"You almost killed your treasure here, didn't you?" She laughed and did a little dance in the doorway, thrusting her hips back and forth. "I've doctored her, but you'll probably fool yourself anyway, take her all over again, this one who could weigh your pockets with gold. Probably do her in with your pecker, because that's how it goes with little roosters. Makes you feel fierce, almost like a man." She laughed again, spat into her palm and rubbed her hands together briskly.

"I have miles to make up," the man said. His voice was calm, but Ya Zhen, who had managed to sit slightly on the bed, could see his pulse pounding in a fat vein that branched like lightning across his forehead.

"What I have to show this child won't slow you much." She closed the door. When she turned to Ya Zhen, all the caustic humor had left her face. "Listen to me, now," she said. "You must change that dressing once every day."

"Keep me here." Ya Zhen's voice was a dry croak.

There was a long silence. Ya Zhen, propped on the mat, watched the woman stare into the corner as if something was written there. Finally, she sighed and took Ya Zhen's hand. Into it, she folded a rag pouch the size of a big turnip. "This is what I can do for you. Change the dressing. Do it the way I showed you before, yes?" Ya Zhen nodded. Her fear sat like a stone on her chest, making it hard to breathe. The woman had dressed her in an old tunic and trousers that were soft with age and frayed at the cuffs, but otherwise sound. She tucked the pouch into her pocket.

"Those three," the woman said, tilting her head toward the door, "are dogs. Sometimes a dog can run a tiger into a corner, but this never works out well for the dog." A tear ran down Ya Zhen's cheek, and the old woman brushed it away. Her fingertips felt stiff as tanned hide. "It is better to be the tiger, little girl."

She went to the door and pulled it open. "Carry her," she ordered the ox-driver. "As if she were your own grandmother."

He ducked into the room and lifted Ya Zhen. She closed her eyes, not wanting to see his face so close to hers. Back she went into the cart among the bags of grain, clutching the tiny bundle of her belongings to her chest. Her bedroll had been spread, and she lay back on it, thankful for the small comfort. The *ēn mā* shuffled out and passed a gourd of broth to Ya Zhen, stoppered with a piece of moss.

"Help her out into the bushes midday and when you stop at night," she told the ox-driver. She ignored the two horsemen altogether. Ya Zhen could see the ox driver was afraid of the old woman. "Otherwise, keep your hands off her, and you might outrun your own sorry luck." She turned without further comment and stalked into her small hovel.

When the door closed, Ya Zhen felt as though any hope of kindness in her life had been extinguished, like spitting on a candle. She lay back, feeling the humped shapes of the grain bags under her, and watched the sky pass as they started down the road again. The winter sun had come out, low in the sky and lacking real warmth, but strong enough to cast a few narrow shadows. She spread her thin blanket over her, trying very hard not to make movements that strained her belly. Lying flat with her belongings tucked under her head again, the pain faded somewhat and the movement of the cart lulled her into a shallow doze that lasted all afternoon.

The men did not help her into the bushes, and she did not ask for help. When they stopped, Ya Zhen inched herself out of the cart and squatted to piss, holding onto the wheel. Her hot urine burned and she chewed the inside of her cheek to stifle a cry. The second horseman came around the wagon and watched her, and there was nothing she could do but relieve herself and crawl back into the wagon. But the men did not interfere with her again, not on the rest of the long trip out of the hills and into Guangdong Province, not once for the next eleven days. The ox-driver brought her tea and food when they stopped for the night, and after the men were asleep Ya Zhen wet a fresh mass of the *ēn mā*'s herbs to pack around her wounds.

When they reached the port at Guangdong on the morning of the twelfth day and turned Ya Zhen over to the broker who had purchased her, she was able to walk by herself. Even thin as she now was, she was deemed acceptable and herded onto a steamship with fifteen other girls. Some seemed as young as Hong-Tai. Several wept, but most wore the shocked and hollow face that Ya Zhen saw when she caught her own reflection in the water. The ship's crew shouted and hectored until the girls were below deck. They all crouched there in the dark, and now the weeping became a tide of broken voices, almost all of them calling for mothers. Ya Zhen kept her own mouth closed and would not cry.

One month they stayed on the ship from Guangdong, girls packed into the lower hold like salted fish in a barrel. Rough seas and no latrine, no way to clean the feces or vomit. Ya Zhen learned during the second week that a young sailor would look the other way, allow her to sit huddled into a corner on the upper deck, if she first let him run his hands under her shirt and between her legs and rub himself furiously against her. It didn't last long. She understood that the hour or two she could stay out in the fresh air, clutching her few belongings, might save her life. Three young women had already sickened and died; their bodies hauled out and tossed into the sea like spoiled vegetables. Many more were too ill to get up off their soiled mats.

Ya Zhen began to know that she would not die and the knowledge brought no relief. One day, while squatting above decks, men began to shout and point over the rails. Faint on the horizon there were dark smudges. This was land, finally. The men called it by name and Ya Zhen tried to repeat the two strange words, but could not: San Francisco.