

The Magistrate's Daughter

by Greg Lam

Those who can see through the mire, they know that this is an age of reason.

The peasants in the fields may be comforted by their stories, their myths and their superstitions. They like to think that impossible things could be true: That a mischievous monkey could steal thunder from the gods, or that everyone's prayers are listened to by higher powers. It gives them peace, to believe that gods watch them and care of their small lives. Their lives need such small comforts and I have no quarrel with them.

But to learn about the world is to learn that there is no shape, no hand of design. There are only men and women and their follies and their crimes. Perhaps this is less appealing for a tale, but more useful as a lesson.

To those who would like to learn, listen to my story.

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I am the only daughter of a high magistrate in the Yellow River Valley region of the Zhou Dynasty. My father is a very wise man. He passed the civil service examinations in only his second attempt and has always served the Emperor faithfully, rising quickly in the ranks of the bureaucracy. He is a man of learning and education, and I have always tried to emulate him.

It was, however, my mother who had the most involvement with me in my youth. She was traditional, superstitious, and shallow. It was she who demanded that I drop any ambition of being more than she had been, a pretty ornament to a powerful man. But her endless conversations of palace politics bored me, and we had little else to say. Even though I was years away from being ready to marry, all of her lessons were about the things I would need to know to please my future husband. I sat through her lessons as best as I could, waiting until they ended and when I could begin my real learning.

In those days, I had the run of the Emperor's palace. And so I spent much of my time talking to the people who served the Emperor, in a quest to satisfy my curiosity.

From the Imperial gardener, I found out about plants and farming. The gardener was an old and small man, but sturdy and hardworking. He had seeds and plants from faraway lands, many of which were never even seen before by mere peasants, like the onion and the potato. If field peasants were

to ever see the Emperor's wondrous crops, they would probably invent some fantastic story to explain its existence.

From the Imperial generals, I found out about the barbarian peoples which surround the Zhou Dynasty. They are backwards peoples, dangerous and dumb. That is why we build walls to defend ourselves.

From the other Imperial Bureaucrats, I found out about the history of our people: How we made ourselves into a kingdom, how the examinations were put into place to promote the worthy, how to write calligraphy. There was much to learn in the palace.

My father, of course, was the wisest of all. He could talk about all these things. Though it's not expected for a daughter to take an interest in such things, he always had time for my questions.

However much I learned, my mother would always admonish me. "What use is it for a girl to learn these things? How does that make for a better wife? Put those things away, and learn how to run a better household."

I did learn some practical things. From the Imperial cooks, I found out about cooking. In the kitchens, I learned how to gut a freshly caught fish, what vegetables and spices bring about the best results of any dish. From the maids I learned how to make clothing from silk and hats from straw, and also many of the songs they sing in the fields and the markets.

Such things were well and good, but they were not my passion. How could I stay inside and learn of mundane duties when there is a world full of things to learn just outside the palace gates?

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As my sixteenth year approached, I decided that my mother's interference became unbearable, and that I must escape it altogether. Without her knowing, I began to gather materials to help me escape. I copied road maps from the bureaucrats' rooms. I stole dried foods from the kitchen, brushes and inks from the bureaucrats, and an old piece of clothing from the gardener.

In the gardener's shed, I spied a small paper packet filled with seeds of some kind. I took those as well.

Soon, I was ready. Dressed in the gardener's tatters, I gathered my things and snuck out of our quarters. If I could get out of our house, I could escape the entire palace and get out into the countryside....

I dropped out of my window and scurried down the passageway in back of our quarters. My heart was racing. I was so nervous, I ran into some clay pots stacked in a corner, knocking them over.

Before I could move, my father came out to see what caused the ruckus. He saw me wearing servant's clothes. He saw me with bundles and supplies. He must have known.

He stared right into my face. He gave no expression on his face when he looked at me.

"Weng Lei," called my mother from inside. "What was that sound? Who was that?"

He paused one moment, still looking at me. "It was only the gardener." He then turned and went back inside.

The rest was easy.

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In disguise, I made my way out of the palace and into the countryside. Walking all the way, until day became night. I did not know where I was going to, but was confident that I could find something.

I also knew that by now my absence would be noticed, and that my mother would demand that I be retrieved. I stayed off of the major roads and traveled deep into the countryside.

When the moon was at its peak, and my feet were blistered and sore, I decided to stop at the next inn that I saw. Between cooking and cleaning and farming, I could earn my keep.

The roads I walked on were deserted, and at times I thought I heard something on the side of the road. And so I began to sing to myself, one of the peasant songs that the servants taught me...

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Suddenly, I heard a voice call me.

"You should not be on this road."

I turned around. It was a young peasant, rough and dirty. I did not hear him at all.

I tried to ignore him, but he spoke again.

"There are ghosts on this road. No young woman should walk it at night."

"Aren't you afraid of ghosts, sir?"

"I know how to deal with ghosts. You spit on them. They are afraid of the spit of living people, you see. Or else they would take you away at night and eat you."

"You are very brave to be on this road then."

From far away, I heard the hoofsteps of a team of horses and the wheels of a carriage approaching. Only the palace and palace staff were permitted carriages. They must be looking for me.

It was far away but definitely coming close. I had to think quickly. I decided to use the peasant's superstitions to my advantage.

"Please, sir. I've been running all night from a carriage of the dead. Can you hear it coming for me? It's mistaken me for someone else. Could you hide me for the night?"

"I have no desire to stir up troubles with the dead."

"But I could help you. I can cook and clean and help farm."

"How do I know you are not a ghost?"

"You could spit on my hand and I won't go away."

I held out my hand. He looked at me oddly, then decided.

"Come," he said. I followed him, and we watched the carriage go by from the safety of the bushes.

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I returned with the peasant to his house. He told he his name was Wong Fong. He would give me a place to live. In exchange, I would help out in his farm.

This arrangement was pleasant, though the work was hard. The peasant had been struggling since his wife died two years since. The soil in his farm was sandy and dry, but with enough work, we were able to turn it prosperous.

The peasant was kind to me and treated me with reverence. He taught me about weather and farming and the people of the village liked him as well. I must admit that after some time on the farm, I grew fond of him as well. He was kind and well-mannered, and not unhandsome. My time on the farm was the happiest of my life, and I wanted nothing more than to remain on this farm, to help turn it prosperous.

After a time, the peasant gave me space in which to garden. I took the seeds which I took from the gardener's shed, and planted them. I did not know that I would never see them bloom.

It was a few weeks before harvest time that the palace guards found me.

I was in my garden in the early evening. From the roadside, I heard a rustling noise. First one, then another. Then, suddenly, there were many: Palace guards, dressed all in white. They had found me, they had come to take me back.

They surrounded and grabbed me. I called out for the peasant. "Wong Fong! Help me!" He came out, tried to reach me, but they stopped him. He was furious. He even spat on one guard, which led the other guards to start beating on him mercilessly.

"Stop hurting him!" I yelled. "Stop and I'll return with you."

The guards listened, and they began to take me away.

My face was awash in tears. They rolled down my cheek and fell to the ground.

I looked back at Wong Fong. He was looking up at me, still bent over from the guard's blows. He was crying as well.

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And now I sit, and now I wait. My mother awaits a suitor who is willing to pay my family the bride price she seeks. This is the only occupation of her

time. She has not found anyone. (Perhaps men are scared of my willful reputation.) But until then, my father no longer lets me converse with the palace staff, or venture far from my house. All there is to do is wait, and contemplate.

And so I do nothing but think of things. Like why stories from life, unlike stories from myth, so often end unhappily. And how my own story might be a perfect example. And here I sit, waiting. Waiting for my ending.

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But that is only one way to tell the story. Here is another.

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A Peasant's Tale

The learned man may claim differently, but magic rules the world!

They tell tales of ghosts who walk the roads at night, and I know this to be true! They also say that they fear only one thing: human spittle. But this I know is false.

They tell tales of dreams that are answered, and I also know this to be true! But be aware that these dreams may not come true forever! The gods which rule our lives are both fickle and cruel!

They tell tales of the origins of things. How man got his wicked heart, how a man sold his dream for silver, only to lose a fortune in gold, how a butterfly could dream of being a man. These I always believe to be true, for I know of an origin of a thing that I saw for myself that is so fantastic I would never have believed it.

How do I know all this? Listen to my tale.

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There are ghosts who walk the night, this is true. We think first of the ghosts who were treated badly and return to seek revenge on the living.

But there are also others.

When I turned 18 years my parents arranged a marriage for me with a clever girl from the next town over. She was pretty and also pleasant, and we were given a parcel of land to farm.

And for a time we were happy and the farm prosperous. She sang wonderful songs of faraway places and beautiful things.

But the gods were unhappy at us for some reason, for the next few years brought a cycle of pestilence on our house. My parents were claimed in a river flood. Her mother was long dead, and her father died the next year, and she was stricken with grief.

She was with child at the time, and I had hoped that she would be cheered by it. But as she grew she also grew more and more morose.

She had good reason, it seems. She died in childbirth. The baby was never born.

The years after her death were difficult. The farm's soil was sandy and dry. Tough to work, especially now that I was alone. Every season brought me closer to failure.

I had long known that ghosts walk the road at night, and that they return for different reasons, not always revenge. We know of the dark maiden who was expelled from the Ninth Heaven for a time. She took a husband for a time until it was time to return. Some spirits are restless, some are merely bored. Little did I know that I would meet with a ghost myself.

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It was the night of the third anniversary of my wife's death when I saw her. That day, I had burned golden paper, and poured wine on her grave to give her money and wine in heaven.

But before I saw her, I heard her. From the road I heard a beautiful song. It was the same song that my poor wife had sung when she was alive. The sound was exactly as I remembered, and I had to go see for myself.

I saw her walking down the road, alone at night. Only a ghost woman would dare do such a thing.

She looked as if she was lost, looking first one way, and then the other. Ghosts are often confused when they return from the dead. She wore a different face and had on tattered clothes, but her beauty betrayed her disguise.

My wife had come back from heaven, and she was searching for me.

In the stories, we learn that a man should never converse with ghosts. We know from the stories that such meetings are rarely good for the living.

But it was my wife in front of me, and I could not resist. I called her, and bid her to come with me. She did not recognize me, or she pretended that she did not, but she agreed to come. She explained that there was a chariot coming to take her away. She did not say so, but the chariot was from heaven. Why else would a chariot travel so far away from the palace?

I hid her from the chariot, and we returned to my farm.

I asked her if she would like to work on the farm with me, and she agreed. I knew that she would.

Day by day I became more and more convinced that this was my own wife come back to me in another form. She sang the same songs as my wife did. Her manner was the same, and she took to the work on the farm like she was born to it. After a time, I gave her her own garden to work with. She happily made it over throughout the season.

I decided that after the harvest season, I would ask for to marry me.

But I should have done this sooner, for a few weeks before the harvest season, ghost soldiers came to my farm. They were dressed all in white, and they came silently from the fields from all sides. They grabbed at her and started to drag her away. She had escaped heaven you see, and it was her time to go back, but she did not want to go. She called for me, called for help.

I tried to reach her, but the ghosts stopped me.

I spat at the ghosts, and struck one down, but others came and overwhelmed me. They struck me down, and grabbed my beloved, carried her away. Through my pain, I saw her tears roll down her face, and fall into the ground below. I knew I would never see her again.

The weeks passed and I mourned her all over again. In my sadness, I vowed not to disturb her garden. Instead I cared for it as if she were still here.

In the harvest season, I noticed something new in her garden. There were green shoots growing from the ground. First a few, and then many. I dug up these shoots, and then I knew for certain that magic was real.

It was a new vegetable, one I had never seen before. One no one had ever seen before. And I knew that these were grown from my beloved's tears.

They were shaped like her tears. It was as if the ground took the tears and grew them like a seed.

When you cut them, they were the same color as tears, and watery as well.

They taste as bitter as a heartache when eaten raw, and yet sweet as a fond memory when they are cooked.

And whenever you cut the flesh, you start to cry yourself.

I knew then that these were made of my beloved's tears, and that these were her final gifts to me.

I called this thing a "water-vegetable" and grew them. There were very many as she shed many tears that day. At harvest time I sold them out in the marketplace. People were wary of buying them at first, especially after I told them the story. But soon they tasted them, and fell in love with it just as I had with my beloved. Since I'm the only one who has this water-vegetable, I was able to sell it at a high price.

Each new year, I now grow and sell more and more water-vegetables and make more and more money. I am now a very wealthy man. This year I have opened up an inn, and people come from far and wide to sample the water-vegetable. My house is new, and I now have servants and luxuries. But I am still a lonely man. My mourning time is at an end, and I wish to marry again.

Currently, I am talking to an official from the high court about marrying his daughter. I can now afford her bride price because of the water-vegetable and I have heard that she is both beautiful and wise and good with cooking and housework, but also willful and petulant. (It is said that she once ran away from her home.) She would, however, gain me much status, a daughter of a high magistrate. Her family seems optimistic about this match.

But only the gods know for certain the ending of my story.

The End