



CELESTE LIM

The
*Crystal
Ribbon*



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AN UNUSUAL BIRTHDAY

If someone had told me two years ago that I would be married the year I turned eleven, I would've laughed at them and said, "But boys are filthy and stupid, like oxen! I shan't get married. Besides, my baba loves me more than any husband in the world could."

But that was before.

It was early spring, and for my eleventh birthday, Grandmama had agreed to slaughter a chicken—something more than our regular rice gruel, *mantou* buns, legumes, and bland corn broth. Just for me!

But when everyone sat down, the topic of marriage came to join us at our table. Aunt Mei was telling Baba about this maiden in the village who recently got engaged to a nice family, but Baba only nodded

and gazed intently into his bowl as though trying to count the grains of rice in it.

I dared to interrupt. “What will happen to Lingling after she gets married, Baba?” I’d long ago learned that if I directed my questions or comments at Baba, I would be less likely to get reprimanded for interrupting a grown-up conversation. Baba never minded my questions, and would even laugh if my comments were witty.

But this time, Baba did not even look at me. Instead, he started chewing on the ends of his wooden chopsticks.

My heart plummeted faster than a rock down a ravine. I stopped eating. “Baba, what happens after someone gets married?”

Baba looked around at the other grown-ups, but when both Grandmama and Aunt Mei said nothing, he sighed and scratched at the stubble on his neck. “Well, Jing . . . when a girl gets married, she leaves her family and goes to live with another.”

Immediately, Wei’s hand clasped mine underneath the table. My little brother didn’t like the idea any more than I did. Leave my family to live with someone else? I imagined waking up one day with a completely different family—voices I didn’t know,

faces I didn't recognize, people I didn't care about. I'd hate them. I'd be miserable.

I gave Baba what he usually called my I-know-better look. "Then I don't ever want to get married. I want to stay here forever."

"Don't be silly, child!" Aunt Mei cried, flourishing the sharp end of her chopsticks just inches from my nose. A single grain of rice spewed out of her mouth and landed on the plum-sauce-roasted chicken. "What a disgrace to the Li family you'll be if you don't get married," she continued. "When the time comes, you will wed."

To my surprise, even Grandmama nodded as she picked up a piece of pickled carrot. "We will have to start looking for a suitable family soon."

Aunt Mei probably needed a suitable family more than I did. But I knew better than to answer back, for it was seen as great disrespect for children to do so.

Aunt Mei was Baba's older sister, and had been married to Uncle Tai, a blacksmith in our village. Having no in-laws, she eventually came back to live with us after Uncle Tai died at war nine years ago. No one ever mentioned that Aunt Mei should remarry, but back when she was still alive, Mama had told me

that men rarely considered widowed or divorced women as wives because they were thought to bring bad luck. One time I asked, “Why then do we keep Aunt Mei with us if she’s bad luck?” and Mama had hitched on such a stern look that I never dared ask again.

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After breakfast, Wei and I kneeled in front of the small wooden altar on the ground beside our front door. On it were three tablets carved out of bamboo: two of them belonged to deities—Guan Yin, the goddess of mercy, and the Great Golden Huli Jing, the guardian fox *jing* of our village. The last one was Mama’s mortuary tablet, and on it were the words, written in red: *Here be the place of early departed daughter-in-law of Li—Wu Caihua.*

I brought my hands together, holding a lit incense stick, and bowed thrice. I closed my eyes.

Mama, I don’t want to go to another family. Please watch over me; don’t let me leave you.

Finally, I stuck my incense into the incense holder, moved back, and touched my forehead to the ground in a kowtow.

Then Pan began to wail from his reed cradle, and from the fitful way he cried, I could tell he was

uncomfortable from wetting himself. I hurried with a clean rag into the room Wei and I shared. At about twenty moons, Pan was still a wrinkly little thing. His nose turned slightly upward like a pig's snout, especially whenever he cried, which was why I called him Zhuzhu.

Ever since Mama left us after giving birth to Pan, I had been put in charge of caring for him. Wei and I had believed the reason we lost Mama was because of Pan. The midwife said that Mama had bled too much. But Grandmama did not take the responsibility away from me even though I hated it so much. I had sulked and cried and sulked. I hated the idea of Pan replacing Mama in our family, and Grandmama would often scold me for being neglectful in my babysitting. On my cruelest day, I even left Pan in the daisy field on purpose, thinking that wolves could have him.

But no one ever found out my horrid deed, because as I left, my heart started to feel as though someone was using a soy grinder on it.

Pan was only a baby. He never meant to cause Mama's death. He hadn't asked to be born. Mama had birthed him out of love, and here I was, trying to harm the son for whom she had given her life. Would I really dishonor my mother like that?