

1. LAO-TSE

I know that I've lived for hundreds of years, but does that mean anything if time doesn't mark you? More than once, as a young girl, I struggled through a blighted childhood, became a middle aged chattel and finally a bent crone who only wants to be freed from a body racked by pain and sour memories. Before I could die, time reversed and I became young again. Memories would disappear like sand falling through a sieve, places, people knew, old thoughts and attitudes. By the time I became a carefree ten year old, I'd almost forgotten my name.

As a child, I felt old wounds as if they were inflicted yesterday. For days I wandered alone through tall grass and tried to remember my past lives. Why does being alive evoke a deep sense of shame? That I've no right to live, breathe or participate in simple joys? Why do I feel so much loss, mourning someone who died yet not knowing who? Something terrible happened to me long ago that exiled me to this land of dreams where nothing is real, where people with no more intelligence than apes kill each other for meat; sell their children for a few meals.

I was a young woman, looking forward to married life, when Shang Yang's

armies ended my dreams. One terrible night they swept through our village, slaughtered my family and burned the house to the ground. Accompanied by refugees and orphaned children I headed for the mountains. On that long journey, most died on of starvation or cold. I dug so many graves; often wished that I could be the one being buried. I tried to escape from the nightmare by throwing myself into a lake but when the water hit my face, my body decided that it wanted to live. I ended up alive on the shore.

We reached this mountain village. Only sparse grass and thorny bushes grow here. Food comes from rice paddies and fields in the lower valleys. Above the village a small garrison guards the pass to the desert.

I supported myself by selling my body. Besides being profitable, sex is a narcotic that lets me forget my painful memories. For a few hours I can be like other mortal women and totally enjoy my body. I'm selective about my clients. They have to be rich enough to afford my price, strong lovers who take time to seduce me, and who can give me exquisite pleasure. I've never been raped. One man who tried to take what didn't belong to him ended up dead. My clients all pay me graciously.

One afternoon when I was feeling particularly low, Guan Yin, appears in my doorway. A soldier from the garrison he comes to me regularly for conversation. Sometimes for sex.

My hope for sex fades when he pulls out a scroll and waves it in my face. He sits on my bed. 'Take a look at this.'

'What is it?'

'Who do you think I met up at the pass?'

'Lord Shang himself,' I say, disgusted by Guan Yin's effusive emotions. I didn't

feel like smiling.

‘Shang Yang? No. Someone else, someone old and wise.’

‘I’ve never met anyone wise.’

‘You must have heard of Li Ehr. Also known as Lao Tse.’

‘Li Ehr?’ Blood pounds in my head at the sound of the name. I try to disguise my hatred of the man, but it shows.

How many years have I known of him and his absurd teaching, as asinine as Mozi's teaching of Universal Love? Unfortunately the charlatan was popular in Wei. Our people, unable to compete with Shang on the battlefield, took up Li Ehr's pacific philosophy. A fine result. My parents were killed, our village burned, its inhabitants butchered all because of Li Ehr's *Way of Heaven*. So much for non-action, an idea regurgitated from the days of the sage kings when people were more civilized. Shang Yang found the teaching most convenient since our people didn't resist his army. His soldiers were not impressed by our non-violence. Each soldier had a quota of heads to chop off, and we made it easy for them.

‘I’ve not only seen him,’ Guan Yin says, ‘But shared tea with him. Listen. This morning on duty at the guard house I saw him heading up the road from the valley --- a white-haired man on a tired donkey. I didn't know who it was. Skirting the village, he took the road to the outpost.’

‘As is my duty, I blocked the road and asked the stranger to state his name and business. Not until he said his name did I see it was Li Ehr -- my master and teacher whom I hadn't seen for years.’

‘Was the venerable man lost?’

Guan Yin's face shuts as if a curtain draws over it. 'Why don't you respect the old, those who are wise?'

I swallow my pride. I could tell him something about age, but why bother? 'Old people can get lost too.'

'Surely, you've heard of Li Ehr?'

'I'm not sure.'

Guan Yin lets out a sigh so noisily he almost whistles. 'He's the greatest living sage. What can I say of him? His vision is more sublime than any man's. Not for a thousand years has a man of such vision walked among us.'

'So -- what happened?'

'I persuaded him to drink tea with us in the guardhouse. He said he was leaving the world -- really leaving it.'

'I suppose he is.'

Anger chokes me. While we reap the bitter fruit sown by that charlatan, he's about to escape into the wilderness where he'll live out a peaceful life meditating under a tree. Not if I can prevent it.

Guan Yin continues. 'Li Ehr has lived a long life. He speaks of the Dao in a way that simple people can understand. His words give hope to the weak and the downtrodden.'

'Then why is he deserting them?'

'He's grown tired of the world. Perhaps he feels that people don't understand him. He honoured us greatly by stopping at our station.'

'Has he gone?'

‘Yes, but he left this.’ Guan Yin unrolls the scroll in his hand and prepares to read. ‘I asked the master for the kernel of his teaching, so his vision would live and not be lost to the world. A scribe wrote them down while we drank our tea.’

‘The Dao, absolute...’ He labours over the letters, like someone who barely knew how to read.

I reach for the scroll. ‘I can read.’

‘You?’

Obviously he’d never met a literate woman. I’d recently taught myself to read and write. For some reason the skill that eludes most people came to me naturally.

I scan the hastily scribbled words.

‘The Dao that can be related is not the absolute Dao.’

‘The universe is everlasting because it does not live for Self, but for Dao...’

Guan Yin listens attentively while I read a string of platitudes and cryptic utterances, pretentious enough to sound convincing. To think that hundreds of people who believed that stuff are now dead.

I let the parchment fall onto the floor mat. ‘This is nonsense. Wisdom can’t be conveyed in words.’

Guan Yin shrugs. ‘What do we have but words? We only imagine we’re wise, but we know nothing.’

‘Nothing, yes, that’s it. We know nothing, and never will. All we can ever hope for is to enjoy life to the fullest. With every sense.’

Guan Yin sits in a daze while I tie on my leather belt. From under my mat I draw out my curved knife with the jewelled hilt and stick it behind the belt.

'I have to go.'

'Where to?' he says.

'To find him. He'll hear from me yet before he disappears. Which way did the old man go?'

'A few hours ago his donkey took him over the pass.'

I sweep aside the skins hanging over the door and head for my donkey.

I wrap a scarf about my head to ward off the cold wind. At the outpost I find two sleepy guards rubbing their hands over a small brazier. They smile at me.

'Hey -- want a job?' one guard says with a lascivious leer. Ignoring them I ride on over the pass and down into the desert.

In the soft, yellow ground I find fresh donkey prints. I dig my heels into the beast to make it go faster but it plods on as before. The road is a faint ribbon that winds in and out of the bare hills until it vanishes into the golden desert. Before long I catch sight of him, a dark speck creeping against a distant hill. I kick the donkey's sides. If Li Ehr stops to rest for the night, I might catch him soon.

After sunset, grey shadows sweep over the hills. The cool night air has a frosty bite but I shrug it off. I will avenge my parents before I freeze. Soon the path fades to where I can barely see it. A crescent moon offers the only light. Even in that twilight the donkey finds his way among scattered boulders and holes. It doesn't seem to care where its next meal will come from. I don't know either. The prickly plants on either side don't look edible.

I find Li Ehr sitting beside his beast by the side of the road. I almost ride by the dark figures when his rasping voice arrests me, 'Your donkey is hungry. Won't you feed

him?’

His white hair glistens in the moonlight. I make out a long hooked nose, thin cheeks, and a small mouth. He laughs softly as if at a secret joke. If he senses my anger, he does not show it. Like Mozi, he may not like women. His wife died over fifty years ago. I doubt he's slept with a woman since.

Holding a bag of grain he blocks my way. I swing out of the saddle onto the rocky ground.

‘Fair woman, your donkey is hungry.’

‘Don’t bother me about him. It’s you I want.’

‘Why do you pursue an old man who is tired of the world and too stupid to say anything wise?’

‘Why did you let that fool write down your words?’

‘He needs something to comfort him. He offered me tea, and I had no money for payment. I could not refuse his request.’

‘He wrote down nothing but lies.’

‘Not lies; only random words. Let people do with them what they will. I have said enough.’

‘Yes, you said enough. Your words are more deadly than the spears of Shang's army. Do you know how many people died because of you? I was in Wei the night Shang's troops swept through. Unarmed people faced them, practicing your non-action. My family was slaughtered along with hundreds of others. Your words robbed my people of their strength.’

His eyes return a hard stare.

‘Answer me,’ I say.

‘You speak only the truth. Those who took my words for their own, created falsehoods. Do not blame my words for the miseries of war. The destruction wrought by the Quin armies would have been far greater had the people of Wei resisted with weapons. Evil cannot defeat the Dao because it neither sees or understands it. No force can defeat what offers no resistance. I can talk like this until I die, but unless your heart sees the meaning of my words, they remain useless. Even dangerous.’

‘Those lies will corrupt generations to come. Thousands more will die because of you.’

Li Ehr turns away as if scarcely listening. After a prolonged silence he says. ‘I am leaving the world. Don't trouble me with people and their illusions. For decades I talk but no one listens. A few seeds were planted, from which the truth may grow. Too much has been done. The time has come for nothing to be done.’

‘You will not escape me.’

‘What would you do?’

I draw out the knife. ‘I would avenge the deaths of my parents and my brothers. I want you to feel the pain of those who died.’

His eyes don't respond to my words. I'm not sure he sees my knife. After a long silence he says, ‘Kill me if you wish. I have no desire to live a moment longer than necessary. Yet -- this is all very strange, that you should come upon me here.’

My fingers tighten on the knife. I have killed rapists and robbers, but I don't want to destroy him. ‘What are you saying?’

‘We met before. A long time ago.’

‘Old man, I have never met you.’

‘The same voice. The same face. Yes, it is you who came to me long ago in the library in Zhou. You were very learned then. Spoke to me of things that happened farther back than anyone remembers, as if you had seen them.’

‘You’re mistaken. It was someone else,’ I say but cannot disguise my hesitation. I’d never been to Zhou. Certainly not in this lifetime. Nor had I met the old man, but what if I had? I stare into his bright eyes, trying to jog my pathetic memory. A library, an archivist? Something stirs inside me. His face and voice begin to appear familiar. I can even see stacks of scrolls.

‘How old are you?’ I say.

‘I do not count years. But I remember that day. Confucius was at the library, and he asked me to explain a certain ritual.’

‘You’re a fraud. Confucius lived hundreds of years ago. You could not have known him.’

‘And you? Might you have known him?’

I look away lest I reveal too much, but too late. He knows my secret. I can’t kill my enemy, because he has lived as long as I; because he may be able to tell me who I am.

‘How is it that your life is so long?’ I say.

He returns a scarcely perceptible shrug, the only possible response to my absurd question.

‘If we met long ago, what did we speak of?’

‘About children. You asked, ‘Why must children be born?’ Your question was most strange because of the manner in which it was asked. Not, ‘Why are children born?’

but ‘Why *must* children be born.’ I don’t remember what I said, but whatever it was, it made you angry.’

‘If you were truly wise you’d know the answer. But you’re a fraud. Look at me. I’m real and this knife is real. I was not born into this world, yet I’m trapped in it. Forced to live among blind wretches like you. Each day children are born, and old people die. When you see newborn babies, don’t you feel pain and pity? They’ll grow up, gather storehouses of knowledge. Suffer war, deprivation and disease. Become embittered shadows of what they might be. Only when they lie down to die will they understand that they’ve lived a dream. By then it’s too late to change anything. For too long they’ve cut an old track that they must follow. There’s no time left for anything but death. And so it goes on. That’s life; a wheel of torture. For years I’ve tried to escape it but for me the way is shut. Why am I still here? Answer me now, or if you don’t know, then cease your blabbing about some transcendent Dao.’

His eyes gleam in the starlight. Even at night I sense in them an overwhelming power, one that would destroy me.

‘Noble woman, you come to me with questions. Would you hear an answer from my lips? Consider carefully if you want me to speak, only to wonder later whether I lied to you.’

I now recognize his voice, older than Confucius, speaking to me across centuries of time. ‘Long ago I lost something. Do you know what was taken from me?’

‘Yes. We spoke of it. I would not repeat what I told you lest my words deceive you.’

‘Tell me now.’

‘You are armed and you can take from me whatever you choose. Even my life. When I am dead, what will you have but a lifeless body? Will you be content with that, instead of truth that may find a home in your heart? The Dao?’

‘The Dao!’ My scream echoes from the rocks. My hand tightens on my knife. How I want to silence his voice. ‘The Dao is a lie and you know it. You invented the word because otherwise you wouldn't have anything to say. Old man, admit to me now, for my ears only that the Dao is a lie. That your words contain no truth. That you flee into the desert before your devotees discover your deception.’

‘Small chance of that,’ the old man says. ‘Their eyes clouded with knowledge cannot penetrate my teachings. A few might, but not many. Perhaps I lied, but brutal force not kind persuasion, is required to awaken human minds from the sleep of knowledge. Is that why you're so outraged?’

‘You admit that you lied?’

‘Yes.’

‘That your lies killed my parents?’

‘The Endless War has claimed other lives than your family's. There's no cure for human hatred. You can choose to participate in it, perpetuate the conflict, or not. What would you say to people who face slaughter?’

‘You ask me?’

‘Yes. You hold a knife, so you must know how to deliver death.’

I lower the blade. ‘I cannot do it.’

Tears well up in me and I collapse to my knees. His bony hand strokes my long hair and rests on my shoulder. He waits until my sighing and my tears subside.

‘Each passing day I know less,’ he says. ‘Long ago when the fount of wisdom dried up, the underground waters sought new and hidden ways. For a short season they surface only to disappear again. I was privileged to drink from them. Now I am an old man but no longer thirsty. My words are barren. I have no more to say. Continue your search in the wide world, or join me in my travels.’

‘I can’t join you. I must find out why I am imprisoned here. But old man, your voice awoke in me ancient memories, the voice of a lover I once had in happier times.’

‘I planted that memory. Remain watchful. If the Dao is a lie, then each word I utter must be listened to with great attentiveness. The mind enmeshed in desire twists words to satisfy its cravings for peace, security and self-worth. Don’t listen to me. Flee before you lose yourself, or if you cannot leave me, take the knife and plunge it into my heart.’

I am unable to reply. I scarcely know who I am. A true master can escape me easily. So does Li Ehr.

I hand him the knife. ‘Take this knife, master. I offer it to you as a sign that I will no longer kill.’

He examines the blade and the jewelled hilt in the starlight, then hands it back to me. ‘I won’t accept this. That knife can no longer be separated from you. You can’t relinquish what belongs to you. Besides, I have no use for weapons.’

A cold gust of wind creeps under my robe. Chilled to the bone I begin to shiver.

‘I must return now,’ I say.

‘The way back is long and difficult. Remain here with me. We need each others’ warmth.’

We lie together, our bodies against each other. All weariness lifts from me. I want to stay with him, abandon my search for a way out of my nightmare, but I sense that I must not. I'm only able to spend one night with him. While the cold wind blows over us, I lie peacefully, listening to his slow and contented breathing.

Upon waking I find the sun already high and the old man gone. A few indistinct footprints in the sand are all that remain of that night-time sojourn. I look into the distance but see nothing move in the yellow haze. My heart is heavy for the abrupt parting. For hundreds of years I've known nothing but partings. Mounting my beast I turn its head back toward the pass. One task remains for me before the day is over -- to stem the tide of lies.

When I reach the guardhouse I find Guan Yin with his back to the fire pit. From his dull eyes I guess he's been drinking saki or some other narcotic. He shakes himself awake and steps toward me.

'Did you find him?' he says.

I walk up to him. 'Show me the scroll. He wants to make one small change.'

Guan Yin disappears into the brick house then emerges several moments later, scroll in hand, accompanied by a short, balding scribe with a satchel of pens.

I grab the scroll, unroll it as if to read it, and before anyone can stop me, I drop the manuscript into the fire pit. The yellow tongues devour it greedily with a slight hissing sound. Guan Yin draws his sword and rushes me but I draw my own blade.

'It's done.' My knife clashes against his sword. 'Kill me if you dare.'

His sword trembles with anger. I don't expect to survive. Let him kill me, end my

suffering. However I am not so fortunate. He lowers the sword, realizing that my death will not bring back the sage's last words. The sublime lies.

‘This is not the end of Li Ehr's teachings,’ he says. ‘I will write them down from memory. His words will live.’

‘They won’t be his words, but yours. You won’t find it easy to repeat words that never found a home in your heart. Go write down your own, and pass them off as Li Ehr's.’

I mount my donkey and canter down the path to the village. I had committed a crime for which the community will punish me. Rather than waiting for the inevitable exile, I gather my few belongings and leave the village. Though my blow for truth was futile, I feel that my family --- the only one I remember, can lie in peace.

My wanderings will continue.

