

# Translation: Chen Ruoxi's *The Grey-Eyed Black Cat*

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This is an old wives' tale in my village: 'a grey-eyed black cat is bad luck incarnated; death follows at its tail'.

**1**

*Dear Qing,*

*I received your letter and the book you gave your friend to bring over. I like the book very much. Thank you.*

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<sup>1</sup> This is a translation of the Chinese text '陳若曦自選集', written by Chen Ruoxi. The original text is from *Chen Ruoxi's Self-Collection*. Taipei, TW: Linking Publishing, 1976.

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*In the letter, you asked about Wen. But Qing, how can I tell you? Poor Wen! A fortuneteller foretold her short life by reading her face. Who would have thought she would really die at such a young age? I am afraid to think of her. I see her shadow everywhere all the time. Whenever I think of her, I can't help cursing the so-called fate and wonder how on earth no one seems to ever escape from its grasp? And if there is such a thing called fate, who's the master of it? I can't wait to be the first to mock him!*

*I remember it vividly. It was the evening of the Lantern Festival. Mother, Auntie and I were eating glutinous rice balls in the hall. Silence descended over the room; no one uttered a word. Many times, Mother put down her chopsticks, shaking her head and sighing. She must have been thinking of you. Suddenly, the door flew open and Da-Sheng burst into the room.*

*'It's Wen... She's... deeeaaad.' He cried out, stuttering. I was stunned by what he just said. 'No!' Auntie began to wail, thumping her fist on her chest. 'Wen! My poor daughter! Let me go with you!' Her cries were full of sorrow. Mother could only offer comfort, her own eyes filled with unshed tears. I looked at Da-Sheng with a blank stare. His lips turned blue and his face taut. Turning away abruptly, he ran towards the door. I dropped my chopsticks and ran after him, finally catching up at the threshing floor.*

*He didn't say a word. I just followed him in silence. The moon was hiding behind dark, dense clouds. Darkness enveloped us. The wind was howling as the wind chill seeped inside our clothes. As soon as we went through the woods, I heard some noises from a crowd and saw a few lanterns swinging back and forth in the distance like ghost lights. In the dark, we stumbled up the path leading to the precipice. Up there, it was packed. Some people lifted lanterns overhead as they looked down with frightened faces. The others surrounded a child, whose eyes were wide-open.*

*'The cat ran for its life and she chased it with all her might, all the way through to the mulberry woods... Later, I picked up some firewood and was about to head back. Just then I heard a scream; I thought it must have been someone falling off the cliff... so I rushed to get help...' The child spoke with fear and anxiety, hands gesturing in the air.*

*I followed Da-Sheng. We pushed through the crowd to the edge of the precipice. My eyes welled up with tears as soon as I looked down. Qing! I can barely hold my pen as I write these words. Who would have thought our dearest and most beautiful friend would end up like this tonight: facing skywards, she lay on her back on a bed of dead thorns. Half of her face was covered by strands of hair tainted by blood. One of her eyes remained terrifyingly wide open, reflecting lifelessly the shimmering lantern light.*

*The town chief finally arrived. He asked a young man to climb down the rock with Da-Sheng. They went down by vines and prepared ropes to pull up the body. When they moved the body, they found a black cat underneath. Da-Sheng took the liberty to bury it there and then.*

*I stood on the rock crying. Staring at the dark sky and the land, I called for Wen again and again. Yet darkness swallowed her, along with the black cat and my tears, as well as all my childhood memories.*

*The Zhu family really had no conscience. Instead of a heart, they had iron in its place. Why did Wen have to marry into the family? Is that bad karma from her past lives? The night Wen died, none of the Zhu family showed up. When her body was taken back to them, they had the nerve to say that a violent death should not come through the front gate, so her body was passed through a side door. Poor Wen, even in death she couldn't use the front gate!*

*Qing, sometimes I think it's better that she died, though I still feel sad whenever I think of how miserable her death was. Wen never had a good day after she got married. Her life was already over by the time she lost her mind. Recently, I have spent quite a lot of time in deep reflection. I see Wen in my mind all the time. Thinking of her tragedy, I couldn't help being skeptical about our traditions and customs. People in big cities would never have thought how powerful the remains of a feudal society could be in a rural village like ours!*

*As to Da-Sheng, you must wonder how he is doing, but I have no clue I'm afraid. After Wen died, I only saw him once at her grave. He seemed to have aged in a night. Some said they often saw him sitting alone on the precipice. He left before Qing Ming Festival. No one has ever heard from him since.*

*Auntie has been ill in bed since Wen died. Her heart disease struck again. These days she is barely conscious. Mother often shakes her head and sighs. I am afraid it will not be long before Auntie passes.*

*Mother again wants me to tell you to come home, Qing. We're looking forward to your reply and the date of your return.*

—Di

## 2

Ten years ago, when I was a little girl with pigtail braids, Wen and I were best friends. Not just me, other children in this area also put her on a pedestal because she was gorgeous. Everyone liked her. Auntie doted on her so much, yet Uncle treated her like nothing. He thought raising daughters was indeed a waste of money. Sometimes, after a few drinks, he would repeatedly complain that Auntie was useless because she couldn't give him a son to continue the family name. Also, because both of our Chang families had no sons, Uncle had thought of taking a concubine. He often picked fights with Auntie over anything and everything. No matter what Uncle thought of Wen, we were all proud of her. She threw tantrums sometimes, but no one had the heart to blame her.

In my hometown, autumn was the season for children. Harvested rice paddies, fields of golden autumn foliage, mountain ridges and wild streams were all our world. Back then, we were all crazy about flying kites. We always competed to make the biggest and the most exquisite kite that flied the highest. The kites were shaped like various animals. At times, they were made out of coloured papers. At other times, they were made of satin. Wen's work was always the finest among us all thanks to her nimble hands and only Da-Sheng's kite could occasionally compete with hers. Da-Sheng was an orphan, adopted by my father's cousin and had farmed cattle for him since he was little. We had been close friends and always played together since then.

One afternoon that autumn, Wen, Di and I were in the hall, learning to sew. When we were stitching on the white cloths, suddenly the lilting sound of a flute drifted in. It was Da-Sheng calling. Wen dropped her needlework, fetched her newly made kite and ran outside. Di and I followed suit, with our pathetic works in hand, retrieved from the corner

of the house. We met Da-Sheng under a banyan tree, and all of us ran gleefully toward the fields. On the way, we met the twin brothers of the Hua family and some other kids in the village. Everyone held a kite in their hands. Led by Wen and Da-Sheng, we headed to the Zhu family's harvested rice paddies.

The Zhu family was the richest in our village. Their fields stretched out as far as you could see. After the harvest in autumn, the fields were flat and smooth and we liked to run around on them without a care in the world.

The Hua twin brothers were the most eager, releasing their kites as soon as they set foot in the field. They grabbed the string ends and started running against the wind. A while later and after a few tumbles, the elder brother's eagle finally lifted in the wind, gliding alluringly in the sky. His little brother's kite, on the other hand, struggled a bit before flopping down to the ground. Then Di also freed her little bird into the sky. Da-Sheng's old man smirked in the wind with his long beard floating in the air. Even the little Yang girl's swallow flew up into the sky. Only I, despite running and stumbling, still couldn't manage to launch the incense burner made by my mother. Wen noticed my dismay and came to my rescue. Before long, my incense burner joined the ranks among the others.

'Wen, why don't you fly your frog?' Da-Sheng shouted as he ran around with the string in his hands.

'Come on, Wen! Let's see if your frog can jump higher than my eagle!' the elder Hua brother confidently challenged her.

Wen pressed her lips together and looked at his eagle scornfully before releasing the string in a run.

'Look! Look!' she looked up and yelled as she kept running forward. Her frog, with a big belly and bulging eyes, flipped a couple of times in the mountain wind before soaring straight up to the sky. It peered down at everything beneath and hopped in the air.

'Wen wins again! The frog is the biggest and the highest-flying kite.'

Wen couldn't hide her smile. I also smiled proudly for her.

We played for a while, and eventually everyone gathered their kites to sit and rest on the edge of the field. The strong mountain winds soon dried the beads of sweat on our foreheads. Di noticed, in the distance, a

kitten by the road. She went up to fetch it. The kitten's fur was all black with a beautiful sheen. It was fluffy and soft. It didn't fidget when we held it in our hands. Everyone played with it and thought it was adorable.

'Ah! Grey eyes!' suddenly the little Yang girl cried out in horror. 'Mom said a black cat with grey eyes brings the worst luck. You see it and you die.'

'Die?' Wen said in disbelief. 'Is that true?'

'I don't buy it. Never heard of it.' Da-Sheng said.

'Well, I remember my granny said the same thing. A black cat with grey eyes brings you bad luck. It's the reincarnation of bad guys,' a girl told Wen, somberly.

'Now I remember,' Di went on, 'Auntie once said that she saw a grey-eyed black cat when she gave birth to Wen.'

'So what? Wen is still here.'

Then, a dozen or so small faces turned their gazes to the little black cat. It snuggled tamely in Di's arms. 'How adorable! It won't bring us bad luck.' Di whispered in a low voice as she gently patted the cat.

'Ah!' Wen suddenly exclaimed, and her dark black eyes glimmered like stars in the summer sky. 'Shall we let the kitten fly the kite?'

'Sounds great!' everyone agreed, clapping their hands in excitement and jumping to their feet. Again, Wen started to fly her frog kite and took the kitten from Di as her kite went high enough. With the Hua twin brothers' help they tied the string around the kitten's neck and let go of it. At the beginning, the kitten was frightened, meowing and dashing around the field. All of us, pleased by the amusing scene, were laughing and clapping our hands. The frog kite gradually went higher and pulled the kitten running with it. We ran after it, giggling.

The mountain wind grew stronger as the sun went down. Suddenly, the frog kite was blown by a gust of mountain wind. We saw the frog shaking its belly, and then it shot into the sky in a straight line, taking the kitten with it. Now we were all scared. Only the Hua twins were still clapping and cheering. My heart sank as Di grabbed firmly on one of my sleeves. We ran anxiously after the kite. On the ground, in fear, we chased the kite flying in the sky.

All of a sudden, an anguished wailing stabbed into our ears. Turning around, we saw an old woman wearing a black headdress around her forehead, stumbling into the field.

She waved her hand at the black cat being dragged by the kite. 'Oh my, who... who the hell are you? How dare you torture my kitten? Help please...' she cried out in agony as she ran, all huffing and puffing. My feet were as heavy as lead, running after Wen blankly.

The kite flew toward the mountain and the kitten had turned into a black ball and gradually, a dot. The farther it went, the smaller it was. When the kite flew close to the precipice, its string snapped, and the black dot fell to the ground like a shooting star, all in silence...

'No!' the old woman cried out and fell to the ground. Her face turned red and blue, and the wrinkles on her face twisted horrifyingly. Her deeply sunken eyes were set in two dark pits, a bright fire blazing as if they could swallow us. We stood still and stared at her in horror. No one dared speak.

'My poor cat, oh, my precious, my life!' She started crying aloud like a baby, her voice dry. 'You must haunt the killer! Ah, you little villains. Whoever killed my cat, I would curse you and your whole family to die miserably and bear no child!'

The old woman suddenly turned to point at us and rebuked us, 'May God bring justice. I curse you all, you bastards!'

She sat on the ground, spurring a litany of the most malicious curses, her face distorted with anger. We stood still as if rooted in front of her and stared at her in fear. Soon, she started her wretched crying again, and then struggled to get to her feet. She left with her hands covering her face. Now the black headdress slowly edged away, but her wailing still haunted the wind, hammering into our hearts.

For a very long while, we were lost for words. 'She's mad,' a girl broke the silence.

'I heard the same before,' someone agreed with her.

Wen looked ahead in a blank stare; her face was as pale as a sheet of white paper.

Suddenly, she started sobbing. Da-Sheng immediately escorted her to leave.

In the greying sky, the kite was nowhere to be seen.

## 3

When Wen was seventeen, she received many marriage proposals. Auntie was extremely picky, because Wen was her only child. Matchmakers' footfalls almost flattened the threshold of the house, but Wen still wasn't engaged. In our family, my Uncle had long been in charge because my father died early. My Uncle's words were law for the entire family. He had some education, but never made good use of it. At home, he always put on this arrogant face, as if we were to put him on a pedestal and to always follow his orders. Nothing he did outside, however, was worthy of our respect. That was not the worst. I hated him the most for being an alcoholic. I always thought Wen's life was ruined by the drinks in his hands.

One autumn night, we were chatting in the hall. Uncle came home completely drunk, falling flat on the threshold. Auntie got up to help him into his room. Wen's brow puckered slightly into a frown, yet she said nothing. Soon, we heard an argument breaking out, and then Auntie walked out alone in a rage.

'Sis, what happened? Why were you fighting?' Mother asked in concern.

'Uh, how can I not be angry just talking about it? I told him to reject that family, and there he goes, promising her to the Zhus!'

'The Zhu family?' Wen straightened herself in shock and looked at her mother incredulously.

'Can't blame it on me, Wen! That's what your father did when he was drunk.'

'The Zhus? I remember they sent a matchmaker the other day...'  
Mother cocked her head when she recalled this.

'Yes, and I turned her down right away.' Auntie said, 'I know Mrs Zhu's temper very well. She always took advantage of me when we were young. We fought once, after which we didn't speak for a long time. If it wasn't her...' She stopped abruptly.

Later I learned that if it weren't for Mrs Zhu's plots, which drove a wedge between the family and Auntie, Auntie would have been the one marrying into the Zhu family.

The Zhus were rich indeed. The father kept two concubines. One of them was tortured to death by his wife. The concubine's mother could not



let it go, so she came to question her daughter's death but was thrown out by Mrs Zhu like rubbish. They didn't even give the concubine a proper coffin, treating her worse than they treated a servant. It was said that the son, Da-Nian Zhu, was barely literate. He got very uppity after a few trips to big cities. He was especially good at eating, drinking, gambling, and whoring. He was bad tempered, just like his mother, treating servants like animals. His eyes seemed very untrustworthy, and the girls around this area always cautiously avoided him.

Poor Wen. From then on, it would be hard to see her sweet smiles again. Day after day, she just worked lazily and silently on her wedding dress, and she did not say a word about her future husband. At first, Auntie was upset about this and often complained that her husband was a fool. Later, she changed her mind and enthusiastically prepared Wen's dowry. Uncle seemed to forget all about this. He carried on as usual, heading out after a meal, with his smoking pipe between his lips.

Before long, the Zhu family chose a good date to visit us with the bride price. The house was crammed with mounts of crystal sugar and wedding cakes. Greeting the guests, Uncle and Auntie were both beaming, looking all very happy and joyful. Only Wen sported a straight face. The Zhus thought she was shy.

Wen's wedding was set after the winter solstice. The wedding day was a fine sunny day. Right past eleven in the morning, the sedan chair from the Zhus, carried by eight men, arrived to pick up Wen. Wen prostrated herself before her parents as goodbye and was helped up onto the chair to leave. She was followed by twelve carts of dowries. Di and I were bridesmaids. We sat on sedan chairs, each carried by two men, following the dowries. We all entered the Zhu's house to the sounds of pipes and drums.

The groom was in a black changshan and a red magua, the traditional long robe and riding jacket. He came out, opened the door of the sedan chair and helped his bride out. Followed by the matchmaker and bridesmaids, they slowly walked into a hall decorated for the wedding ceremony. The red sheets with blessing inscriptions hung on the walls. Each side of the hall was packed with guests. Da-Nian Zhu's parents sat, all high and mighty, on palace chairs. Their faces looked stern and snobbish. The bride and the groom prostrated themselves before the

parents, touching their heads to the ground three times before getting back to their feet again. Mrs Zhu examined the bride closely, and then she removed a pair of emerald jade bangles from her wrists and gave them to Wen. Mrs Zhu then waved her hand, implying that the ceremony was over. The groom stayed outside to greet the guests while Di and I escorted Wen back to her room.

Though it was winter, it felt hot and humid that day. Wen asked me for a cup of tea when I got tired of sitting and waiting, so I gladly went to find tea for her. I had no idea where their kitchen was, so I wandered aimlessly in the corridor.

I made a turn past two chambers when I heard a woman's voice coming from a room. 'The bride is gorgeous indeed, but Mrs Zhu doesn't seem very happy about this marriage.'

'That's for sure. They wouldn't be married if the young Master didn't insist. Mrs Zhu wasn't really happy about this wedding. You know that she had a fight with Mrs Chang when they were young! I just heard her complaining to Mr Zhu that the bride didn't shed tears at all, and that's not very ladylike! Uh, why didn't Wen just cry a little?'

Cry a little? That didn't make sense at all. What was the point for a happy bride to pretend to burst into tears? Even if she's unhappy, the tears are useless anyway.

I pretended to run into them and asked for some tea politely. One of them ran to get it for me, and the other stood there staring at me blankly as if I was a freak. A while later, the other woman rapidly ran back to us with a cup of tea in her hands, while half of it had been spilled on the way. 'Ju, Ju, something happened in the hall. All the kitchen staff are heading over there. Come, hurry up!'

She shoved the cup at me, and grabbed Ju to run with her. I looked at the half cup of tea, immediately put it aside and ran after them. On the way to the hall, the noise gradually increased. When I was about to step over the threshold to the hall, Mrs Zhu emerged from a room in the opposite wing. She frowned and looked truly bewildered.

The hall was crowded. People stood around a big wardrobe, which was part of Wen's dowry. They were wagging their tongues and hands over something. 'Mrs Zhu's here!' someone said. Everyone got out of her way to let her pass. The chatter died down to a murmur. Mrs Zhu, holding her

head high, looked all confident as she stomped over. When she was half way through, suddenly her eyes went horribly wide and her jaw dropped unintentionally. She stood there, frozen as if her feet were rooted to the ground. Afire with curiosity, I elbowed my way through the crowd and was also stunned as I levelled my eyes at the open wardrobe.

One of the top drawers of the wardrobe was open. A cat was sitting on rolls of fancy lace. Its pure black fur was shimmering in the light. Its grey eyes were round as pearls from which radiated a grim, iron-grey light. It sat there calmly and at ease, as if it was mocking the crowd with a glare, staring fearlessly back at all the eyes staring at it.

The matchmaker stood helplessly in front of the crowd with keys in her hand. Her face turned white and her eyes shifted between the wardrobe and Mrs Zhu, whose face now looked terrifying.

'The bride's family... how can they be so careless to have left that thing in the wardrobe,' someone in the crowd muttered in a low voice.

'Right,' said another lowered voice, 'and this black one even has grey eyes. Everyone knows it's the most ominous thing...'

'Fu,' suddenly Mrs Zhu yelled in a stern voice. 'Get some men and send all these dowries back to the Changs. Ask Mr and Mrs Chang to come to see me!'

Her pale face turned blue, flames burning in her eyes. The hall was silent, and no one dared speak.

'Sheng, get the cat out of here and hang it!'

'I am afraid we can't, Mrs Zhu. If we kill it, it would bring bad karma.' An old man tried to stop her and shot a fearful glance at the wardrobe.

'Mrs Zhu, I'll say,' said another person strolling forward, 'please hire a Taoist priest to drive the evil spirits out of here. As to the bride...'

'Oh God, now the wedding has turned into a disaster.' Mrs Zhu said before turning around to her stunned son. 'Go, get a priest here!' she said.

As Da-Nian Zhu ran out, his father staggered in with an opium pipe in his hand and cloth shoes on his feet. Having no idea what had just transpired, he stared at them suspiciously and turned to look at his wife. 'What exactly is going on here?' he asked her.

'The black cat with grey eyes,' Mrs Zhu pointed at the wardrobe with a trembling hand.

Mr Zhu turned around, and at that moment, boom, the black cat jumped out and scared the poor old man. ‘Ah!’ Mr. Zhu shrieked and crumbled to the ground. Mrs Zhu threw herself at him, ‘Help!’ she cried out and everyone in the hall went into a great bustle.

The black cat fled the hall, vanishing like lightning.

#### 4

Di and I stayed with Wen for the three days. As I recall, it was like a nightmare. There was a priest in a Taoist robe, his wild hair flying in the air. He swung a wooden sword in his hands, muttering words between his lips and pacing outside the newlyweds’ room. The chamber was filled with incense smoke. With windows shut firmly, the smoky air was so strong and thick as if it had turned solid. It was so stuffy and hot that we could barely breathe. A red wedding candle cast a gloomy light on Wen’s teary face. Staring ahead, her eyes were dull and glazed, her arms draped across her chest limply, her cheeks puffy, and she was biting on her pale bottom lip. She turned into a miserable portrait. Oh, poor Wen, Auntie would be so sad if she saw this!

Di and I felt obliged to stay with Wen, and we hadn’t seen daylight for three days. All the while, Da-Nian Zhu never showed up. Only servants brought us meals, and at times, the wild-haired Taoist priest came in to burn paper money. Sometimes the burnt ashes flew up into Wen’s hair, but she couldn’t even be bothered to pat them off. She just leaned against the bedposts, looking lost.

On the second night, Wen had a fever. She lay in bed, her cheeks burning red. She kept muttering that she wanted to go home. Di and I panicked and didn’t know what to do. We tried to open the door, but it was locked from the outside. No matter how hard we banged on it, no one answered. We could only take turns keeping vigil at her bedside, watching her unconscious face and listening to her occasional murmur in her dreams. Staring at the candle that almost burned out, I cursed the Zhu family angrily.

‘Wa... water...’ Wen’s voice was extremely weak. Di got to her feet immediately and walked to the dressing table. I heard her lift the cup’s lid. ‘Ah!’ she suddenly cried out, throwing away the cup and running into my arms, looking too frightened to breathe. I helped her sit down at the

bedside and turned to look at the dressing table. In the dim candle light, there was a vague, black shadow sitting on the dressing table; its eyes were two bright spots in the dark. Uh, the damn cat! Everything went wrong when it showed up. Where had it come from? I stood beside the bed with a pair of scissors in my hand as I fixed my gaze at the cat until dawn. Soon, an old female servant came to deliver the meal. By that point, I was exhausted. I told her the bride was sick and had her inform Mrs Zhu to get a doctor. And then I fell asleep in a chair.

When I woke, the smell of the incense in the room had become stronger. The priest was continually muttering something in his mouth and swinging a bell in his hand. At times, he dipped a willow stick in a glass of turbid water and then spread the drops on the bed. The little cat was still sitting on the dressing table, its tail straight up, its black fur standing, and its cold, sharp glare fixed on Wen, who was tossing and turning in bed.

That night, Di got sick too. She felt dizzy and threw up. I panicked, banging on the door and crying for help. An old female servant took a glance into the room, and fled in shock right away, as if she had seen a ghost. Helpless, I stayed with them and wished dawn would arrive soon. Fortunately, in the morning, my mother sent a sedan chair to pick up Di and me.

Knowing we were leaving, Wen's tears fell like waterfalls. 'Please don't let my mum know I'm sick,' she wept. I consoled her and helped Di walk out of that horrible place.

As we walked out, everyone we met had a stern face. From a distance, I saw Da-Nian Zhu in a mourning suit and the sound of crying drifted toward me. I was wondering who had died and was caught by the sight of a grand, black coffin as I walked out the hall. The coffin was surrounded by the Zhu family's relatives, who were weeping over it. Mrs Zhu, in her mourning suit, was crying with an overwhelming grief. 'No... how could you leave us? We can't live without you!' She stamped her foot, beat her chest and suddenly, desperately threw herself over the coffin. Scared by this, Da-Nian Zhu rushed forward without hesitation to hold her back. Some guests, one after another, also came to console her. At that moment, my hatred toward them, like snow caught by sunlight, melted.

That was the first time I saw the cruelty of death, and I couldn't help feeling deeply sorry for them.

Most people in the village blamed Mr Zhu's sudden death on the black cat. They exaggerated the black cat into something so scary that a three-year-old would cry when he heard of it. However, the Zhus blamed all this on Wen. She had been tormented from the moment she was married into the Zhu family. Everyone in the household, from the young to the elderly, from the servants to the master, all blamed and bullied her. They avoided her as if she were possessed by a demon. Only the little grey-eyed black cat followed her all the time. Wherever she went, the black cat followed. As soon as she stopped, the cat would sit on the floor and squint at her with its grey eyes. Whenever Wen tried to kick it, it cleverly got out of the way. This put her in great dismay. She tried everything to get rid of it and failed. No one would help her; no one dared. As Uncle heard of it all, he just said, 'We don't have a claim on a married daughter anymore.' He would then carry on casually smoking his pipe.

Next autumn, Wen gave birth to a baby boy. Di and I visited her with the traditional gift of four-coloured candies. Her appearance shocked me, and I couldn't help but sigh when I thought of it. She used to be beautiful and curvaceous; now she had become all skin and bones like dry tree trunks in deep winter. Di could not help crying, tears rolling down her cheeks. 'Does Da-Nian treat you well?' I asked Wen. She lowered her head with her eyes welling up, looking sad and pitiful. I should have known the answer when I saw her in this shape.

Before we left, she held on to my clothes, looked around and then turned to me, 'You know, they are taking away my son! I have to protect him. Can't let them take him. He's my baby. He's my life now!' she said in a low voice.

'Wen, that's not going to happen,' I comforted her without hesitation, 'It's your son. Who would dare take him away?'

She stared at me for a while, and then shook her head, tightening her hold on the baby in her arms.

When we walked out of the room, we met the old female servant who used to bring us meals. I pulled her aside because I couldn't help asking about Wen's life here. She looked around and said in a low voice, 'Everyone says she's a lunatic! Even Mrs Zhu says so... Often she screams

at night. I once clearly heard her muffled scream saying 'stop following me! kill that thing!' I guess she was talking in her dreams, but now not even the young Master will share the room with her. Mrs Zhu said she's worried about the baby. Once Wen finishes her postnatal care, they'll take the baby away and raise him somewhere else. Somehow, she knew this. These days she holds the baby all the time and doesn't let anyone get close to him, not even a bit. She doesn't have enough milk for the child, and the baby's always crying, poor kid.'

I believed Wen would not have gone delirious if they hadn't taken the baby away by force. Since then she had never been lucid and was always incoherent. She never combed her hair or washed her face. She would stare blankly with her sunken eyes and murmur nonsense. She grabbed everyone she saw and asked for her baby. She also became much angrier at the black cat. She would grab everything around her and throw it at the cat whenever she saw it. One night, she chased the cat all the way to a barn, and someone happened to walk by with a lit candle in his hand. She took the candlestick and threw it at the cat. The flame caught the straw that covered the paddy, setting it alight. Fortunately, they had enough people to put it out in time, or the barn would have burnt to the ground. This made the Zhus angrier than ever. Mrs Zhu sent someone to keep an eye on Wen. Wen was grounded. Yet, she still managed to sneak out, wandering around by the paddy fields.

Very often, I hoped she would wander back home, but she never did since she got married.

## 5

Six months later, Wen's baby boy died of illness. That was when she really lost her mind. Often, people saw her in the Zhu family's graveyard and heard her heart-wrenching wailing. She and the cat were the main topic for village gossip, and sometimes people felt sorry for them.

The Zhus sent another matchmaker to us, the Chang family, to propose another marriage. Uncle felt guilty because of Wen, so after a few words with the matchmaker, he agreed I should marry into the Zhu family as a concubine. My mother was too weak to protect me. Auntie dared not stand against her husband. Uncle, as if he felt nothing about Wen, sent them my birth chart, which was used to assess the

compatibility of a couple. He decided my future for me. I refused. I hated every single one of them in the Zhu family. On the eve of the wedding, I abandoned my family and ran far away to this metropolitan city. My life since has been tough, but I have never wanted to go back home. When I finally found a way to contact Di, it turned out that Uncle had died, of a disease caused by my escape, she said. For his death, I did not even shed a tear.

Wen is dead. I think it was for the better. Often, I think of her short and tragic life. I cannot figure out why she was treated like that. The ancient tale of the black cats always flashes into my mind. I am confused. Was Wen a victim of the bad luck brought on by a black cat, or was she sacrificed to the obsolete traditional family system? I don't know.

Di sent me a letter, asking me to go home. I hate to see or smell anything of that mountain village. I think I will get Di out of there one day when I am settled in the city. Let the young stay away from that desolate and suffocating village, where the old would perish with that rotten, ancient system, along with all the despicable sins it committed!