

The Woman in Red

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Years later Luoluo came back to the hill where she had spent her childhood. The hill had changed a lot.

Stone steps sided with flowers started from the hill foot and extended into tree shades, displacing a flat space that used to be there right after visitors climbed a set of modest steps. In that space, visitors used to pose to take pictures, older ones with silk scarves around their necks or in their hands, younger ones gesturing a V. Then they turned left to a cobblestone path that wound around the hill. Soon they would begin a journey full of mosquitoes, coolness under trees, endless greenery, and calls from fortunetellers along the path.

The fortunetellers were usually old men, except for one. They wore a pair of dark glasses,

sitting behind a small wooden desk covered by a piece of red cloth that hung down near the ground. On the different red cloth pieces there were the same words: see into your future by your birth date and hour; predict your marriage; foretell your upcoming luck/disaster. The only variation was that some were written in beautiful styles, others ugly.

Now the open space, the cobblestone path and the fortunetellers all disappeared. Not a single trace of them could be found, as if the new steps had the magical power to erase everything that dared to preexist them. A white stone arch stood before the steps, with ink on it which read: New Hill Park.

Silent for a while, Luoluo heard a call from her back, “Lengleng?”

As she turned around, she saw a woman in a red dress, who appeared surprised at sight of her.

“Really, it’s you! It’s been so long, I can barely recognize you.”

But Luoluo knew who she was the moment she heard the call. She found that the woman hadn't changed a bit through the years – no, not really. She had developed layers of eye wrinkles, deep laugh lines, greying hair, and she seemed much shorter than she had been in Luoluo's memory.

Some things essential about her, however, stayed the same. The red dress, the purple eyebrow tattoos, the gold necklace. And the way she called her name, which Luoluo had resented since the age of five, “Lengleng”. It meant dumb, confused, but Luoluo at five had never thought about herself that way.

She sighed. She hadn't heard this nickname for a while, and now it was like a trigger. Something else surfaced in her brain. A green face that she didn't quite remember what it looked like, was looming in the mist above a green lake.

“Hi...how's going?” Luoluo murmured, faintly. “Pengfei's...mom.”

The woman smiled.

“Not many people call me this way nowadays. I felt like going back to when we still lived here.”

The first seven years of Luoluo’s life was at the foot of the little hill. Along the dusty road in front of the hill, were rows of one-floor houses, each taking up fifty square meters – a small kitchen near the door whose space was mostly taken by a table, a curtain hung next to the table, behind which a bed, a closet, a desk, several chairs fought for space – but somehow managed to serve all the functions of a proper house.

When it was time for lunch, parents would light a fire with dry leaves and sticks in the big hollows centered in a concrete cooking hearth as high as half of the wall. Pots would sit in holes above flames, with rice braised in one and vegetables fried in another, and water would boil over coal stoves while hot steam constantly pushing up the iron covering of jugs. When everything was done, parents would take off their oversleeves and shouted over the neighborhood: “Jiajia!” “Doudou!” “Cuiqin!”

“Come home and eat!”

Luoluo was one of those kids who would need their parents to call three or four times. Later when she recalled her childhood, though poor, restricted and numb, she believed that it had been in a sense the best time of her life, when she still saw clearly without glasses, when she did not have much homework, when she knew where to spend time, and when she didn't like eating.

Twenty years into the future, Luoluo hated herself for being too able at consuming. She was sometimes confused by this capability, as in her old memories, the girl was in an age of fast metabolism, and she never liked eating.

It was a huge problem to parents that their child didn't want to eat, though. Luoluo's parents were concerned about the girl's health, and they scrutinized her every meal, trying to squeeze into her stomach as much food as possible. Meals then were a torture.

When she was offered steamed buns as staple food one night, recalling its dry and pale

texture, Luoluo managed to persuade her parents to let her out to play during dinner time, with a promise that she would definitely finish her bun. The second she went into the darkness outside she joined her friends, Pengcheng and Pengfei, and she threw away the steamed bun.

“You don’t tell my parents.”

They nodded at it. Luoluo was pleased with her friendship with the two boys, totally unprepared for a betrayal. However, the next evening, when Luoluo and Pengcheng fought over a perfectly round pebble and Pengcheng lost to her, he went straight to Luoluo’s parents, “She threw away the steamed bun she promised to finish last night.”

When her father dug out the bun that had turned into black, dust all over it, though Luoluo had always been the smartest kid in her neighborhood, she was blank for a while. When she resumed, she strived for an unlikely hope, “I didn’t do this. I happened to drop it yesterday, and you’ve told me I should not eat dirty food.

It also rained last night, that should be why it was so...deep.”

Her father’s adult wisdom outsmarted her childish one. Apparently he didn’t buy it.

The delighted look on Pengcheng’s face, however, put her into meditation. Did they ever have a friendship or not? She followed her father into the house and turned to look at Pengcheng, who was left in the darkness outside.

She was strangely peaceful.

If people don’t get along, they don’t get along for a reason.

In her twenties, Luoluo was even more sure that she wouldn’t make good friends with Pengcheng. She hadn’t thought about their ended friendship for a long time, and would not have come back to it, had it not been she visited the park today, and met the woman once again.

“Is everything good? What do you do now?” the woman asked.

“Not bad. A programmer. You know, write codes and find out the bugs on computers.”

The woman gasped in admiration.

“A really profitable job, isn’t it? Only smart people could do that. I knew you would be something big. You have been smart since you were little.”

Luoluo looked at the ink “New Hill Park”, her hands in pockets.

“Maybe.”

Deep down, however, she shook her head.

Something big? She wasn’t. A profitable job? Enough for a good single life. Smartness was a myth. She worked twelve hours a day, and others worked even more. The world had changed. Now it was all about persistence, time management, sleep-deprivation, and self-entertainment.

When she was little, though, she did enjoy being praised for her intelligence.

Unlike her friends, Luoluo had the reputation of being smart. At the age of four, when others were still struggling with counting to thirty, she invented a word “tenty” since nobody told her there should be a change when

entering the three-digit-numbers' world, "a hundred". She read books whose majority was not pictures but texts, and this was the only thing that could keep her from going too deep into the hill. When doing placement tests in primary school, others could barely recognize 300 characters, whereas Luoluo hit 1000.

Smartness at that time was a huge advantage. She easily won over the adults' preference when others were hiding their test papers from parents. But this did bring her some problems.

She found it difficult to understand her peers' bitter situations.

One afternoon, Luoluo was again waiting for Pengcheng and Pengfei to finish their homework. It was simple arithmetic of addition and subtraction, and Luoluo would have in her brain the right answer at sight of the puzzle. But it took the two boys so long.

Before Luoluo ran out of her patience, the boys' mom came in.

"Until this is done, you are not allowed to go out." She was in her red dress as usual and

spoke with a strict tone. Turning to Luoluo, however, her voice changed to a sweet one, “Lengle, you already finished yours? That’s great. Maybe you could help these two with their math, the whole neighborhood know you are good.”

“Yeah...I will.” Luoluo nodded with an instinctual smile.

Though smiling, at this moment, she was an apathetic child. She turned to her friends. One frequently paused to sharpen his pencil, as if the correct answer would flow smoothly out as long as the tip was sharp enough. The other kept chewing his eraser, absentmindedly.

All of a sudden, sympathy, the sentiment too rare for kids of her capacity, rose inside her.

Poor thing, eating something with the smell of ink and graphite doesn't make your brain a good one.

But then she sighed.

It was not their fault. After all, they were given birth to by this woman.

Luoluo never liked this woman. She emotionally resisted seeing her there as an objective existence. The woman was one of the fortunetellers alongside the cobblestone path, who would ask their customers to show their hands and say, “This line here is your love line, see the three cuts? You are gonna divorce three times before you meet the right one. Now, if you buy this amulet...” All the fortunetellers did exactly the same thing.

Luoluo never disliked the other fortunetellers, however. What made the woman stand out, perhaps, was the red dress, or dresses, that she always wore. It was so difficult not to spot her in a row of old men with dark glasses and black coats. And perhaps the way she spoke. She didn’t speak the local dialect, since she was not local. In fact, Luoluo was fine with her speaking Mandarin with that foreign northern accent, but by no means could she stand it every time the woman said her name.

“Lengleng!”

Can you just get my name right for once?

The woman was not aware of being disliked by Luoluo. Luoluo did not make it plain either. A lovely, smart little girl was not supposed to dislike anybody. She had always been, and would always be that amenable child, who was there to help others not as smart as she was.

Consequently, when the woman came to her, Luoluo was unable to say “no”.

When the woman came to her in an afternoon, she was writing with chalk on the ground of the open space. Young as she was, Luoluo already showed a talent in calligraphy. Strokes, vertical one, horizontal one, curved one, a little tick, a little dot...she practiced the characters she learnt from today’s class.

The woman came close. She squatted to see her work.

“They are beautiful! You are good at it.”

“Thank you.” Luoluo did not even bother to lift her head. *I know.*

“Can I have a try?” The woman looked very interested. Reluctantly, Luoluo gave her the chalk.

The woman began to draw on ground. One stroke leftward and downward, one stroke rightward and downward, and the last straight downward, below the cap the previous two had made.

A very simple character, a measure word for apples.

This was within Luoluo's expectation. She knew that the woman was illiterate, and that it wouldn't be logical if she wrote something super complicated. *But, how did she manage to write such a simple character so ugly?* Luoluo tried hard to repress her anger.

There should be some space between the last vertical stroke and the cap made by the other two!

'How is it?' The woman asked, with a warm, expectant smile.

Luoluo was however absorbed by her golden necklace. It wasn't a pretty one according to her aesthetics, and the inner side of it got really white as was worn out by sweat in years. Lines were there around the woman's

neck, and when a bead of sweat rolled down, it struggled to overcome at least three obstacles.

“Yeah, it is good.” The woman gave herself a compliment.

I appreciate your tolerance. Luoluo sneered secretly, examining her smile in their very close distance. She couldn't ignore the two brow tattoos, purple, twitching with the muscles around like chilopod drawn by an awful impressionist.

It was at this moment that Luoluo came to a realization of why she disliked the woman so much. The ignorance of her defiant pronunciation of her name, the disastrous match of colors – *red, gold, purple, seriously?* The contamination of a piece of jewelry which was supposed to be graceful or at least pleasant. The incapability to teach her two sons well. And her own deficiency in knowledge, the illiteracy – after all, it was such a simple character.

“Of course it's good.” Luoluo echoed her.

Recalling this only moment of intimacy between them, Luoluo in front of the New Hill

Park regretted that she had not faked her agreement in a more genuine manner. It would be lying to say that she didn't dislike the woman now. She still did, not in the old resentful manner, but a rather guilty one.

The woman's face had faded in her memory during the two decades, upon meeting, however, everything seemed to come back vividly. That long, mournful cry again came around her ears, and the red dress – she stared at the one the woman was now wearing, so bright a color.

She just couldn't change the habit of wearing red. Luoluo thought sadly.

“I am...I am moving to another city. I got into a new company.” She looked into the woman's eyes, which she rarely did when she had been little.

“Really? Then it's lucky we meet today.”

Luoluo gave a light smile.

“Sure.”

She hadn't been here for years. When she received her offer in another city, she somehow decided to come back. This was the place of her

childhood, of happiness, of innocence, of trickery, of intimacy. Her parents still joked about that little girl's politics and cute imprudence, and she laughed with them. A seemingly flawless time.

Not until she met her.

She didn't mean to meet her – of course the woman didn't either – but unexpected things just happened. One cannot predict everything, and occasionally it seems that an inevitability lies in the unexpected fortuity. Perhaps, she thought, this was the actual reason why she came here today.

The lovely child in all people's eyes, if Luoluo was going to comment, was not something of her amicable surface. She befriended with the two boys in the neighborhood, but she wasn't so mindful as, she thought, they might be.

There were times when she thought the boys were pleasant, though, especially in summer. The hill in summer was the best place on earth for its endless greenery and calm under the

canopy. Although mosquitoes were the thing to mind, people wouldn't mind them too much. Rich ones who had air conditioners working in their houses came here to say, "This is much better than the artificial coolness at home."

But for the kids, the mild cold under trees was not enough. They needed something more.

And there was something.

Starting with the cobblestone path that everyone took, but in the middle turning right to a hidden trail behind bush that no one noticed, the kids entered a world which looked so different from the hill outside. It was a deep and dark trail, with the trees alongside endlessly tall and the canopy way up high. Only a modest amount of light survived through the cracks of leaves, and the trail went downward and downward, sounds fading away. It ended before a lake.

Luoluo and Pengfei had not believed him, when Pengcheng announced that he found a lake inside the hill, and that he learnt by himself how to swim in it. Confronted by a real, secret lake,

they got excited to see Pengcheng fulfil his promise, that he would show them swimming.

“The water was cool. It was perfect for summer,” he had told Luoluo and his younger brother the other day, “of course you are not blessed to enjoy it, you can’t swim at all.”

Now he was preparing to show off his superpower. When he made some jumps and stretches, Luoluo pored through the lake. Near the shore the water seemed clear and shallow. To her, hovering in here wouldn’t count as swimming.

“Can you swim a little bit beyond this, a bit into the middle?”

Pengcheng glanced at where she pointed at, where there was a little dot of light glimmering over the dark green water.

“Sure.”

He started quite professional, his head above water, limbs waving under. Looked like a little dog, Luoluo thought, but it worked.

Then he took a fierce dive down. The sound of water splitting and jumping broke the monotony enclosed by tall trees.

“Wow!” Luoluo was amazed by the agility and confidence he demonstrated in this move.

What she didn't expect, was that Pengcheng did not put his head up again. It was so quiet in and around the lake, nothing else apart from their breath and the rustling of their sleeves.

“Pengcheng?” Luoluo called in confusion.

The water was so tranquil.

A chirp flashed above, but nothing echoed it from the water.

“Where is he?” Pengfei asked.

She the same wanted to ask. Where was he? The lake surface flat as a mirror, nevertheless by no means could she bend over that far to see where exactly her friend was. The confident smile he wore was still vivid in her brain, however no trace of him could be found at this moment. How come it was so easy to disappear somebody? She lingered on the question, and though not fully conscious, she touched a sense

of contamination to her impeccable, intelligent childhood.

“Pengcheng?” She trembled in premonition.

To her surprise and great relief, she saw him surface, his eyes fixed on her.

She was never so happy to see him. Inside her was a fear she’d never tasted, besieging a dying hope. Now the hope revived. She reached out a twig to him and cried, “Take this, come to the shore!”

But he didn’t respond. He looked at her with his eyes wide open, and his face unnaturally green like the water. He sank silently.

Even when she became a grown up, Luoluo wasn’t able to figure out this scene.

Why did he surface again but not say even one word? It seemed he was already dead, as his eyes were not blinking, but how could he surface if he was dead? Why was he staring at her?

Luoluo at seven was no capable of articulating these questions. She waited in vain with Pengfei by the lake, and nothing happened.

In deadly silence, her mouth opened and then shut, and then opened again. She could not form any other meaningful sentences, but to plead, “Could you please not tell your mom, that I asked him to swim further?”

Pengfei looked at her, his face numbs as usual. He nodded

Going as three and returning as two, Luoluo felt the trees looked quite different from when they came. They greatly resembled those in fairy tales, in whose world there would be witches and magical powers, and it was not uncommon that a lake could consume a person so weirdly.

However, the instant Luoluo got out of the trail and stepped back into the outside hill where sunlight was everywhere, with an unprecedented sense of unreality, she knew that she came back to the real one.

She watched Pengfei walk towards the woman – he had accepted her second request, that he should be the one to inform his mother. For the first time, seeing that red dress didn’t

trigger any anger inside her. She realized that his footsteps were counting down the last seconds of peacefulness in the hill, which would soon be broken by a slap, and a long, mournful cry.

The following week Luoluo spent it with horror. She waited for the woman to come and denounce her for killing, or at least being involved in killing, her son. She regretted to have asked him to swim further, but then she doubted if that would ever make a difference. The trees, the lake seemed so uncanny and, why would they ever be there? Before she arrived in the very place, she never knew something like that existed, deep in the stomach of the hill.

Why would things end up this way?

But nothing happened. No one came to her. Luoluo heard that they held a funeral for Pengcheng and the woman was truly sad. She didn't go since it was Thursday, when she needed to go to school.

Then still nothing happened.

She got a weird feeling then, as if it was not a big deal even though she had lost a friend. Reflecting on it, however, Luoluo noticed some changes taking place inside her. Her dislike towards the woman diluted, and her tepidity towards the left Pengfei condensed. Most importantly, she got the feeling that she was losing her intellectual superiority. From a really smart, quick girl she grew to a modest, average woman, who in fact might not be that average, but definitely had not reached the prominence she once thought she would.

Maybe – standing in front of the park, she thought – just maybe, it was because of those green trees around, the green water, and the green face, which had caught her in a dreadful dream ever since.

She looked at the woman beside her. Unaware of her absentmindedness, the woman told things about herself.

“I continued to live here quite a while after you moved, but then the park was put under refurbishment for tourism, and I was not

allowed to do fortunetelling anymore. We also moved. Now Pengfei's got a job in the primary school nearby as a teacher, everything's settled down. Except for my little boy, he is so naughty."

She sighed a bit, with a motherly happy bitterness.

Luoluo wasn't so sure about what she just heard, "Your little boy?"

"Oh, yeah. I've had another boy. There."

Luoluo turned to the direction she pointed at. There came two figures, one tall and the other short, their hands holding together.

When they got closer, Luoluo recognized the face of her old friend, who had nodded at her asking him to inform his mother of Pengcheng's death, and who kept his promise to keep the little secret for her. He patted his younger brother in his head, "Did you just say you want something to eat? What is it?"

"Chocolate cookies."

"I'll get you some."

Luoluo saw that warm smile on his face, which distanced the man from the boy who couldn't care less in her memory.

Then she met his eyes.

They exchanged a stare. After that was a moment of silence – maybe a little longer than a moment, Luoluo wasn't sure.

But the woman began to look confused.

“It's so nice to...to see you again,” finally, Luoluo said, “you've changed a lot.”

He gave her a slightest nod.

“You too.”

The little boy looked up curiously at the stranger. Luoluo squatted and caressed his head, “What's your name?”

“Pengsan¹.” He said. As if confused about her shaky voice, his eyes wide open.

¹ “san” in Mandarin means three, third.