The Eye of Jade

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Extract

1

In the corner of an office in an old-fashioned building in Beijing's Chongyang district the fan was humming loudly, like an elderly man angry at his own impotence. Mei and Mr Shao sat across a desk from each other. Both were perspiring heavily. Outside, the sun shone, baking the air into a solid block of heat.

Mr Shao wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. He had refused to remove his suit jacket. 'Money's not a problem.' He cleared his throat. 'But you must get onto it right away.'

'I'm working on other cases at the moment.'

'Do you want me to pay extra, is that it? You want a deposit? I can give you one thousand yuan right now.' Mr Shao reached for his wallet. 'They come up with the fakes faster than I can produce the real thing, and sell them at less than half my price. I've spent ten years building up my name, ten years of blood and sweat. But I don't want you talking to your old friends at the Ministry, you understand? I want no police in this.'

'You are not doing anything illegal, are you?' Mei wondered

why he was so keen to pay her a deposit. That was most unusual, especially for a businessman as shrewd as Mr Shao.

'Please, Miss Wang. What's legal and what's not these days? You know what people say: "the Party has strategies and the people have counter-strategies".'

Mr Shao stared at Mei with his thin eyes. 'Chinese medicine is like magic. Regulations are for products that don't work. Mine do. That's why people buy them.'

He gave a small laugh. It didn't ease the tension. Mei couldn't decide whether he was a clever businessman or a crook.

'I don't like the police – no offence, Miss Wang; I know you used to be one of them. When I started out, I sold herbs on the street. The police were always on my tail, confiscating my goods, taking me in to the station as if I was a criminal. Comrade Deng Xiaoping said *Ge Ti Hu* – that individual traders were contributors to building socialism. But did the police care for what he said? They're muddy eggs. Now things are better. I've done well and people look up to me. But if you ask me, the police haven't changed. When you need protection, they can't help you. I asked them to investigate the counterfeits. Do you know what they told me? They said they don't do that kind of work. But whenever there is a policy change, an inspection or a crackdown, you can bet they'd jump on me like a hungry dog.'

'Whether you like the police or not, we must play by the book,' Mei said, though her voice was less convincing than her words.

Private detectives were banned in China. Mei, like others in the business, had resorted to the counter-strategy of registering her agency as an information consultancy.

'Of course,' agreed Mr Shao. A smile as wide as the ocean filled his face.

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After Mr Shao had left, Mei walked over to stand next to the fan. Slowly the faint breeze flowing through her silk shirt began to cool her.

The door opened. Mei's assistant, Gupin, looking like a cooked lobster, tumbled in. Without a word, he dashed over to his desk in the entrance hall and drained a glass jar of cold tea that had been there since morning. He slipped the army bag from his shoulder and dropped it on the floor.

'Was that Mr Shao, the King of Hair-Growth Serum, I saw leaving?' He looked up, catching his breath. He spoke with a faint but noticeable accent that gave him away as a country boy.

Mei nodded.

'Are you going to take his case?'

'I told him I would, but now I wonder. There is something odd about that man.'

'He wears a toupee.'

Gupin came over with a small packet wrapped in newspaper. 'I've collected five thousand yuan in cash from Mr Su.' He smiled. His face, still red from exertion, shone with pride.

Mei took the package and squeezed it gently. It felt firm. She made space for Gupin in front of the fan.

'Was he difficult?' she asked. Gupin was now standing next to her, his bare arm almost touching hers. She could smell his sweat.

'At first. But he can't scare me or distract me with his tricks. I've seen weasels like him before, and I've travelled many roads. People get worried when they see a migrant worker like me in that kind of place.' The word 'weasel' sounded especially nasty in Gupin's accent.

Mei smiled. At times like this, she couldn't help thinking how

right she had been to hire him. And, oddly, she had her younger sister to thank.

When Mei had opened her agency, Lu, her younger sister, was critical of the idea. 'What do you know about business? Look at yourself – you don't socialise, you can't cope with politics, you have no *Guanxi* – none of the networks and contacts you need. How can you possibly succeed? Contrary to what you might think, my dear sister, running a business is tough. I know: I'm married to a successful businessman.'

Mei rolled her eyes. She was too tired to fight anymore. Since she had resigned from the Ministry for Public Security, everyone seemed to want to lecture her.

'Well, I suppose you are at the end of your ropes,' Lu sighed at last. 'If you can't hold on to your job at the Ministry, what else can you do?You might just as well work for yourself. But I can't watch you jump into a churning river without knowing how to swim. Let me find someone who can teach you the basics of business.'

The next day, Mr Hua had called to invite Mei to his office. There, she sat on a dark leather sofa and was served coffee by his pretty secretary while Mr Hua talked about *Guanxi*, about which procedures could be avoided and a few that couldn't, about creative organisation and accounting, and, most of all, about the importance of having sharp eyes and ears.

'You need to be sensitive to the change of wind and policy,' he said. 'Make sure you always watch out for people who might stab you from behind. And one word of advice –' Mei had quickly learned that 'one word of advice' was a favourite expression of Mr Hua – 'don't trust anyone who is not your friend. You want to succeed, then make sure you have a good *Guanxi* network, especially in high places.'

Mr Hua topped up his coffee for the fifth time. 'What about secretaries?' he asked Mei.

'What about them?'

'Have you thought about what kind of secretary you need?'

Mei told him that she had no plans to hire a secretary, not before she had any clients.

Mr Hua shook his head. 'You can hire someone for very little money. There are plenty of migrant workers from the provinces willing to work for almost nothing. The cost of having someone answer the phone or run errands is small, but the benefit is considerable. Your business won't look right without a secretary. If you don't look right, no one will come to you. Look around and tell me what you see.'

Mei looked around. The office was big and full of expensive-looking furniture. 'You've got a great place,' she said.

'Exactly. What I have here is what people call a "leather bag company". I invite foreign investors to become part of a joint venture. All foreign firms are required to have a Chinese partner, as you know. They come here to meet me, they see a grand set-up, the best address. But they don't realise that I have no factory or workforce of my own. They think I'm important, the real thing. I only go and find factories once I receive money from the foreign firm. If I can do one deal a year, I'm set. Two, I can take the rest of the year off.

'You see, making money is easy. The difficult part is getting people to pay up. That's why I like to do business with foreigners. It's much more difficult with the Chinese. One word of advice – when you hire someone, think about payment recovery and make sure your girl is tough enough to do the money chasing.'

Seeing the sense in what he was saying, Mei advertised for a secretary for her new business. Amongst all the applicants, Gupin

was the only man. Mei had not considered hiring a man to be her secretary. But she decided to interview him.

Gupin had come from a farming village in Henan province and was working on Beijing's construction sites to get by.

'I finished top of the class at our county high school,' he told Mei in his Henan accent. 'But I had to go back to my village because that's where my official record was. I wanted to work in the county town, but my village head didn't agree. He said our village needed a "reading book man".'

It took Mei some time to get used to his accent and understand what he was saying.

'My ma wanted me to get married. But I didn't want to. I don't want to end up like my brother. Every day he gets up at dawn and works in the field all day. By the end of the year, he still can't afford to feed his wife and son. My da was like that too. He died long ago from TB. Everyone says there is gold in the big cities. So I thought I'd come to Beijing. Who knows what I can do here?'

Mei watched him. He was young, just turned twenty-one, with broad shoulders. Packs of muscle were visible under his shirt. When he smiled, he seemed bashful but honest.

Regretfully, she told him that he couldn't do the work she needed. He didn't know Beijing and his Henan accent would put people off.

'As soon as people hear your accent, they will assume many things about you and probably about this business too. Some people may even think that I'm running some sort of con. It's stupid, I know. That's how people are, though. The same would happen to me if I were to go to Shanghai. I'd probably be cheated by taxidrivers and given all the wrong directions.'

But Gupin was persistent. 'Give me a chance,' he begged her. 'I'm a quick learner and I work hard. I can learn about Beijing.

Give me three months and I promise I will know all the streets. I'll get rid of my accent too. I can, believe me.'

In the end, Mei decided to give him a chance. She remembered what Mr Hua had said and thought Gupin would make, if not a brilliant secretary, at least a more threatening debt collector than anyone else she had interviewed. He was also by far the cheapest.

'I'll give you a year,' she told him. 'You have no idea how big Beijing is.'

More than a year later, Gupin had proved to be everything he said he was: hardworking, smart and loyal. He had spent much of his spare time riding through the *hutongs* and streets of Beijing on his bicycle, and he now knew more about certain neighbourhoods than Mei did. He became another pair of ears and eyes for her.

'Well done,' Mei told Gupin. 'Mr Su is not the sort of man to part with money easily. Let's finish up.'

They packed up and checked all the locks on the door. It felt cooler in the dim corridor.

'I hope the weekend won't be as hot,' Gupin said as they walked out of the building. His military bag bounced over his shoulder. 'Are you doing anything special?'

'A picnic in the Old Summer Palace.'

'Going so far for a picnic?'

'It's my university class reunion.'

Outside, the sunshine was hazy and the air thick as syrup. The two of them said goodbye and parted, Gupin heading to a young aspen tree to which he had chained his Flying Pigeon bicycle and Mei to her two-door Mitsubishi, parked under an ancient oak tree.

2

That night, Mei was woken by a violent thunderstorm. The thin windows of her apartment rattled. Thunder cracked and roared, lightning flashed. The sound of rain flooded the space around her, calling to her mind lost thoughts and memories.

She thought about her old classmates, and who amongst them she might see the next day. She remembered Sparrow Li, the small gloomy boy who had played guitar. She thought of Guang, a foul-mouthed giant at six foot three. Big Sister Hui's round face came into her mind too. She remembered their cramped dorm room with its four bunk beds. She remembered the chestnut tree outside their window and the loudspeaker on one of its branches blasting out music at six-thirty every morning. She remembered how young they were.

Slowly the storm began to settle. The rain still poured, now monotonously. Mei tossed about in her bed. In her mind's eye, she saw the courtyard of a temple. It was getting dark and Guang was working a small petrol stove. It was the time her class had gone on a weekend trip to the West Mountains. It was

before dawn and they trod carefully, using torches, along a path hanging over what they later saw in daylight to be a sheer drop of hundreds of metres. They held hands and followed each other's footsteps.

She was holding Yaping's hand. She could feel the warmth of his touch. Her thoughts drifted; in her dream she began to float. They reached the summit and the sun was shining. As they looked around them they saw nothing but endless mountains covered in red azaleas. Only now it wasn't Yaping's hand she was holding.

She was six years old. She was holding her father's hand.

They were walking down a long mountain trail, led by the guard of the labour camp. Behind them, tumbling like a lost leaf, lurched an old woman who had come to visit her son and who was now going home. She was to take Mei as far as Qunming, the capital of Yunnan. There Mei would be met by an acquaintance of her mother's who was going to Beijing by train.

Over his shoulder, Mei's father carried a grey bundle containing Mei's possessions – her clothes, two labour camp standard-issue hand towels, a toothbrush, an aluminium mug, and small toys made from wire, cardboard and toothpaste caps. There was also a notebook her father had made from yellowed paper he had found. Inside, he had written Tang poems from memory. Mei had carefully pressed the leaves she had collected between the pages.

They chatted, as fathers and daughters do, about the time they had spent together and the time they would share again. Mei ran her fingers through the azaleas they passed, making the red flowers dance happily like butterflies.

At midday, they reached the dirt road at the bottom of the mountain. By the side of a cliff, a cold waterfall jetted into a small pool and then through a half-buried concrete pipe down to

the river below. They waited by the waterfall. Birds sang from beyond the trees. Along the cliffs ablaze with the bright colours of the south, the road stretched in front of them.

How long does the road go on? Mei wondered. How far do the trees, the giant mountains and the river go on?

Time ticked away unhurriedly. An old bus appeared in the distance. They watched it draw closer and closer until finally it halted noisily in front of them.

Mei's father handed the bundle to the bus driver, who put it on top of the bus with other luggage.

The old woman, whom Mei was told to call Old Mama, held her hand.

'Don't worry, Comrade Wang. Little Mei will be fine with me.' Old Mama started to board the bus.

But Mei's father did not let her go. 'Tell your mother and sister that I miss them. Tell them I will be back soon.'

'Bus is going!' shouted the driver, climbing into his cab.

Old Mama hurriedly pulled Mei on board.

'Be a good girl, Mei,' cried her father. 'Listen to Old Mama. I'll see you in Beijing! I promise.'

The bus started to cough and shake. Mei ran to the muddy back window and knelt on the wooden seat. She feverishly waved her tiny arms.

'Goodbye,' she screamed, smiling wide as if the sun were inside her and would always shine. 'See you in Beijing, Baba!'

The road began to pull her father and his guard away, first slowly as he waved, and then faster. Finally they shrank into two lost figures. The green cliffs leaned over as if about to crush them. Then the bus turned the corner. They were gone.

Mei woke up. Blinding sunlight had stormed in to the little apartment she rented by the busy ring-road. She had never seen

her father again after they said goodbye on that dirt road twenty-three years ago.

Mei turned her head to look at the black alarm clock ticking on her nightstand. It was late. But she couldn't get up. She felt that she had been drained of her will. Next to the clock was a small black-and-white portrait of her father. The photo had faded over the years. After Baba died, Mama had thrown away all his things – his manuscripts, his photos and his books. This portrait was all Mei was able to save. She had carried it with her, hidden inside a copy of *Jane Eyre*, to boarding school and university. She didn't show anyone the photo, nor did she talk about her father. It was her secret, her pain and her love.

Mei saw her father smiling at her from inside the picture frame. She heard her heart beating an echoless beat. She thought about the happiness that could have been.

The thunderstorm had brought fresh air and a comfortable temperature to the shoppers packing the pavement along College Road. Clothing stores, hair salons and supermarkets enticed passers-by with new styles and discounts. Fruit and vegetable vendors, their goods piled high on flatbed carts, shouted out prices. A peasant woman in wide-legged trousers waved a straw fan over a heap of watermelons. The flies had returned too.

Stopped by the traffic light at Three Village Junction, Mei tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. She couldn't afford to stop; she was terribly late. She had spent too much time washing, drying and styling her long straight hair. She had put on make-up and then taken it off again.

Why did she even care? She shook her head. She never had when she was at university. Then, she was an outsider who never wanted to be in. What had changed?

At the end of College Road, Mei turned north along the high walls of Qinghua University. The traffic had thinned. Cyclists rode at a leisurely pace in the shade of the aspen trees. Mei passed a group of students on their bicycles. It looked like they were going to the West Mountains for the weekend.

She remembered travelling on this very road as a student herself. Peking University, her alma mater, and Qinghua University were sister universities, so by tradition Mei's class was linked with a friendship class consisting of forty-five electrical engineers from Qinghua University. The engineers, mostly men, enthusiastically organised friendship disco parties; there were a lot of girls in Mei's class. She remembered sitting on the back of Yaping's bicycle, her long hair flying in the wind. There was warmth in the air on those nights, and the stars flickered like eyes. Street lamps glowed softly through the jasmine-scented breeze. The night was pure and crickets sang under the pagoda by Weiming Lake.

Over the years, Big Sister Hui had brought her news of Yaping: he got married; he finished his MBA; he started working; he bought a house.

From time to time, she still thought about him, tried to imagine him dressed in a business suit, riding the 'L' train. She wondered whether he still wore the same pair of black-rimmed glasses. Sometimes she remembered his intelligent eyes and shy smile. When she hated him, she imagined him old, no longer slender or gentle. But most of the time, she couldn't picture him at all. The names didn't mean anything to her: Chicago, Evanston, North Shore. She had no image of them, nor could she picture Yaping's wife or their life together. She turned onto Qinghua West Road and caught sight of the Old Summer Palace.

Since their graduation, Big Sister Hui had organised yearly

reunions. Big Sister Hui had stayed in the department, first as a graduate student and then as a lecturer. At first Mei didn't go to the reunions because she didn't want to talk about Yaping or their break-up. Then she was too busy. After her boss was promoted, Mei, as his personal assistant, moved into the favoured circle. She was allocated a one-bedroom apartment and high-profile responsibilities. She became desirable in the eyes of matchmakers. They introduced her to sons of high-ranking officials and rising stars of the diplomatic services. She went with them to restaurants, concerts, movie premieres and state banquets. She sat with their parents in airy apartments overlooking Renaissance Boulevard. She spent her spare time getting to know them so they could get to know her.

But everything had changed when she resigned from the Ministry. People with whom she had worked for years and thought of as friends shunned her.

Maybe this was why she cared so much about today, thought Mei, about how she looked and what her classmates might think of her. These people were her old friends. Though she had never seemed to need them before, she needed them now.