

## The Dancing Girl's Story

You think you know what you've got here. Don't you think I can read your face? The set of your lips, the squint of your eyes. One of *those* women, you think. A bad woman. The kind who lies. You look at me and I know exactly what you're thinking: We've seen this kind of woman before. In the war. In the bars. In the hold of this ship.

I've seen them too, these women. I can recognize the signs, the same as you. They look tired.

But look at my face. No, look closer. Don't worry, I'm used to it. The stares. This face has worn well. I've had a thousand lovers, two thousand. Each has touched this face. A thousand years. You may not see. I do look young for my age. But I remember. Each year. Or more importantly, each man.

Don't worry. Sit down. I'll answer your questions. I'll tell you about myself. From the beginning, as you say.

When I was young, just born, risen from the sea, foam and salt still clinging to my ankles, my skin glistening wet, I danced smiling, eyes burning; I wanted to see everything at once, taste everything; I couldn't keep my mouth shut; I couldn't keep my eyes open wide enough. I danced barefoot on the sandstone, the scent of incense and sandalwood clinging to my breasts, the silk of my skirt smooth against my thighs. I danced, watching everything at once. I was so young then.

I remember the first man, a minor court official. I've forgotten his name. He was nervous; he cast his eyes downward, staring at the ground when I smiled at him. Later, when I touched the small of his back, the arch of his right foot, the curve of his left ear, he blushed. But then he did not look away. He looked into my face and said he loved me, would love me forever, as if he could. He was very young. I remember his cousin, a boy who danced so well I could feel the beat of his steps through the stones of the floor, through the soles of my bare feet. He made love like a dancer, touching my cheek. I felt

the energy of his entire body in that one stroke. But perhaps it was not the cousin, but another man, a visitor from another nation far away. He came through the mountains on foot, carrying his tribute to Angkor in an embroidered bag, a nervous young man very far from home come to visit the palace. He stayed with us for three years. His skin tasted of the forest, pine and cedar. You see, history is wrong, a myth, if you believed that I was confined to royalty. I was created to be pleased, not merely to please, though I can do that as well.

Where was I? My face. This face was meant to beguile. It's never been my intention to cause pain. But what can I do? I live forever and the men don't. I remember the Chinese magistrate. Such a funny man, he stayed for ten years; each was his last, then he would go home for good, he said. Then he was here twelve years, then twenty or more. He kept a journal. He showed me the neat columns of his beautiful script. Queer little pictures, I said. He recorded ten years of banquets, every fish he ever ate, the colors of the silks that the elephants wore for parades, the wild boar fights. And never once mentioned me. These catalogs of food and ceremony, he said, were for his emperor. It was important that he record only matters of concern to the state, he said. Gudgeons and freshwater congers are matters of concern to the state, I said, but not dancing girls? I'll never understand the Chinese.

But I don't hold grudges.

He had a wife and child at home, far away, all those years. His wife couldn't read or write, so he wrote to his brother to inquire about their health, and his brother always wrote that they were well and that they were pleased his post had brought so much honor to the family. Yes, stay, his brother wrote. And remember to write the governor, your cousin is studying for the official examinations and needs a tutor. See what you can do for us. Our father sends his blessings. Our mother sends her love. Your son is coming to resemble you, he is now five years old. Seven years old. Fifteen. So the Chinese man stayed with us. He was not needed at home.

He grew older as I stayed young. His belly round, his skin soft, loose under my fingers, his black hair gray then white, the lumpy shape of his skull exposed. I lay with him sweating and warm throughout the night, the sound of his heart racing, the firmness of his flesh, the prompt attention, so flattering, as later I lay with him cool, cool throughout the night, the mosquito nets drawn tight against the bedroll to protect his soft flesh, his breathing labored, slow, as I put my palms against his forehead and kissed him good-bye. But all that was long, long ago.

This face, the one you see before you, came later, with the war. No, I don't know which one. There've been too many. Do they all have names?

Let me tell you a secret. About living. About immortality. How does one live forever; I mean, really truly live? Have you ever imagined? The secret: I live like you. Each moment, each day, each year. We can only live in the present, after all. Good or bad. Slow and dull as well as exciting and fun, so much fun. Otherwise, how absurd if we all left or intervened or flew away at any moment, whenever things started to drag. Why endure anything? Why not be a bird, a cloud, the wind? This is how I live, have lived. You understand?

But then I did leave, didn't I? After everything. I'd never done that before. It's hard to explain this feeling I had. But things had changed. It was time.

The rabid dogs came to the temple one night, circling the dusty footpaths, filling the air with snarls and spit. I heard their breath competing with the wind, heavy and wet, coming closer.

The men would come later, marching in stiff boots with leaden steps. They had shed their robes for uniforms of a dull brown like olive pits, traded their smooth, wooden staffs for shiny guns.

I left before the men arrived. I stepped from the wall, hand to my diadem, careful not to let it catch in the stone as I walked onto the earth. You may think it cruel, I did not stop to tell my sisters good-bye. But they were sleeping, and I wanted to go.

I lit the joss sticks before the statue of Buddha and let the smoke caress my skin, fill the folds of my skirt. Sentimental perhaps. I pressed my hands together and touched the tips of my fingers to my forehead.

The wind called to me, pushed aside the vermilion streamers surrounding the altar. I felt them flick my shoulders, my calves, like a flame as it's snuffed between two fingers. I heard the dogs fighting, closer now, so close I could smell the blood on their fur. I gathered up my carp, poor thing, neglected in the stone bowl by the door, and ran on tiptoe to the temple entrance. I slipped my feet into the straw sandals by the door; you see, I wasn't thinking clearly. Why would I need shoes? I turned back once, bowed, then stepped out into the night. The wind carried me away.

My carp thrashed against my side, his sharp scales digging into my flesh. I pulled him closer, but he only wiggled more, afraid, no doubt, of this sudden plunge into the dark sky, so cold and dry. I remember when the fish were plentiful: Black carp and tenches splashed in the rice paddies, jumped into nets.

I remember the monks on their visits were fascinated with my fish, played games with him, composing their impossible poems: "How do you catch the slippery carp? Pour oil on it. How do you catch the golden carp? With half a gourd." My carp, white and red with a black cap, tolerated them, surfacing for the crumbs they tossed into the pond, snapping his lips. They thought he was talking to them. "How many monks does it take to feed a fish?" we used to ask, giggling within earshot. "The answer? Ten. One to throw the crumbs and nine to write a poem about it."

To think, only my fish was left.

I flew above the banyan trees. The roots dangling from the branches clawed the air, reaching for my skirts. My poor fish shook, his body starving for water. His tail lashed against my back and I felt warmth rush from the wound, run down my sides. The fish wriggled less violently, my blood pouring from his scales, his thirst slaked.

I left the men and dogs behind to fight, their fur and hair, howls and shouts swirling in the air. There was no room for me in a world where men mixed with dogs. Can you understand?

How long did I travel? Years. Lifetimes. It's all the same.

Endlessly, I searched the horizon for the glimmer of a wave. To the west I saw the purple mountains spotted with fire. To the south, the edge of the forest crept toward the sand. But it was the desert, not the beach. Meteorites like lightning streaked across the sky, but the moon hid her face.

Below, the little people fled in the night on foot, generations walking toe to heel, toe to heel, in lines like thin snakes across the countryside. I followed one woman holding a baby that would die three miles later from its fever and a little girl who would survive a year and a young boy who was very thirsty and ran a step away from his mother between the bodies toward a pool of water that only he with his bright child's eyes had seen reflecting the stars. He stepped lightly, and the click like a bone against a bone froze everyone in the line exactly as they were, toe to heel, frozen in each other's footsteps. "Don't move," the old woman in front cried. "Don't move." The mother looked at her son, felt the weight of the hot baby burning her arm. The young boy wanted to cry. He looked to his mother. The line began to move on, wearily but with purpose. "Don't move," the old woman in front called to the boy. Toe to heel, toe to heel, the families moved forward until the mother was left facing her son, who had begun to cry. She wanted to join him, despite the baby and the little girl. Her lips moved, "Don't move don't move don't move." She will whisper this forever. And in that moment as the wind picked up, she looked up into the cool breeze, into my face. I smiled at her, my face beguiling. She forgot to whisper, and the boy moved. The instant before his head was blown from his body thirteen feet behind his mother, I reached out and snatched his soul and held it in the palm of my hand. The wind was warm from the explosion, and we were pushed forward far away from his mother, who stared after me, her mouth filled

with her voice, and I left the line of little people far behind. We raced above the clouds into the light of the moon. And I tossed the boy into the sky where the wind grabbed hold of him and rushed away. I'm not supposed to intervene. It's true. The cycles of birth and rebirth. But you were not in my position.

My wings grew, beating the air, my hair streaming behind me like the tail of a kite. My skirt fell off into the wind and my legs were freed, to kick and bounce against the air. The mouth of my fish pressed against my ribs, opening, closing.

At last the scent of the ocean tickled my nostrils. I fell, my wings glistening in the light of the rising sun, sparkling with the white salt embedded in the traces of my blood. My arms grew tired; I drew them closer to my body, my legs grew close. My fish leapt from my side, plunging into the smooth water with a wag of its tail. Like a dragon I dove in beside him, the cool water slipping across my body. I rolled against the soft waves like fine silk. I slept.

Until you found me.

Caught in that net with the ugly, mute fish that are glassy-eyed and smelling like decay. The fishermen pulled me to the surface and dropped me on the deck of their boat. Then your men came, in their white soldiers' clothes, pulled me by the arms from the thrashing bodies and pushed me into the dark room packed with the thin dark people, the still children and the silent babies. Then you, it was you, not I, remember, who asked me to come into your room and answer your questions. And all the while you sit there, you and the other man with the tape recorder and the dictionary and the pile of papers, you take notes and I talk and you ask me more questions.

And now you look at me like that.

I am not crazy. I will not be dismissed, so you'd better sit back down. Sit.

You with your questions. Do-I-fear-for-my-life-do-I-fear-political-reprisal-why-have-I-come-to-this-country? Why-didn't-I-stay-where-I-came-from-do-I-have-family-

here-do-I-think-I-can-make-money? “I-N-S?” you say slowly, enunciating each letter.

“Do you understand?” Do I?

I am not crazy. And I am not a liar.

You wanted me to tell you everything. Everything, you said. I've told you.

But can *you* understand? That's my question.

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