

The Misty Lake

During their poorest days, Suying's mother sold her gold earrings for a bag of rice and a dozen eggs. The earrings were the last valuable items she owned and were given by Suying's grandma, but she had no choice with a family of four children to feed.

When they were about to run out of food again, her parents looked around the house for more things to sell. Her father locked his eyes on the watercolor scroll painting hanging on the peeling wall above his desk. It was a gift from an artist from the small town where her father spent his childhood.

"It's a nice painting and might be worth something," he said. Her mother nodded with a faint sigh.

It saddened Suying that they would sell the painting. It was her favorite object in the house and the only decoration they had. In the painting, a traditional fishing boat with a blurred figure standing on it floated on a misty lake. Gray mountains ran along the background, with a tinge of steel blue. Whenever Suying felt tired or stressed, she gazed intently at the painting and imagined she was on the boat, cool air caressing her skin, water rippling and undulating as the boat crossed the lake. A moment of reverie allowed her mind to wander away from the worry of money and food.

But she couldn't bring herself to tell her parents that. She buried her face in the book she was reading, as her father took off the painting and rolled it up. He tucked it under his arm and headed out of the door. When the door clicked shut, Suying peered up at the long rectangular space which used to be the painting, the color there lighter than the rest of the wall. A sense of loss unfurled in her heart.

Suying was in no mood to read her book anymore, so she pulled out a few pages of her old homework and drew people and animals on the back side. She was good at drawing, but never had the chance to take art classes. Her mother had told her it was expensive to learn arts and not practical for a family like theirs. Suying only drew occasionally to relax her mind.

Her father was back sooner than she had expected. Her eyes widened at the sight of the roll of the painting clutched in his hand. “The pawn shop gave such a low price since the painting is from an unknown artist,” he said, frowning. “Not worth it. I’d rather keep it.”

Suying almost blurted out an exclamation of relief when she heard the last few words. Her throb of joy was soon replaced with a wave of concern when she noticed a look of dismay crossing her mother’s gaunt face framed with mousy gray hair.

Her father was the only one working in the family. He was an editor at a small press company, with a meager wage. Her mother, a stay-at-home mom, washed and sewed clothes for others to make a little extra cash. Their income was barely enough to live on.

“Keep the painting. We will figure something out,” her mother said, weariness in her tone.

Suying watched her father lift the painting and hang it back on the hook with measured care, slowly unscrolling it into its full beauty. For a moment, she wondered whether he had really wanted to sell the painting.

A neighbor told Suying’s mother that a couple was looking for a live-in nanny and the pay was appealing, but if she took the job, she could only come home once a month. Her mother hesitated at first. She had a long conversation with Suying’s father, who preferred her to stay at home with their children. But Suying’s mother convinced him that they didn’t have any alternatives, and she would rather make more money to get better nutrition for her children’s

growing bodies than stay with them and watch them starve, with merely watery millet and pickled turnips.

The day before her mother left for the nanny job, she called Suying to sit next to her and asked her to take care of her three younger sisters. At 14 years old, Suying had already helped with many family chores. Yet, the thought of assuming the role of mother to her sisters still pinched her heart. Her oldest sister was 10, and the twins were only seven. She noted down in her small notebook everything her mother told her to work on and pay attention to. When Suying reassured her mother that there was nothing to worry about in the family, her mother hugged her, her eyes rimmed with red.

In the house without her mother, Suying felt like she had grown up overnight. Although her father could help after his work, she was the one to prepare meals, clean the rooms, wake up the twins, braid their hair, and make sure her sisters finished their schoolwork on time. On weekends, she hand-washed clothes for the whole family. She remembered her mother's words, "We don't have new clothes, but our clothes are always neat and clean. That's important." She missed her mother and counted the days when she would be back.

In her scant spare time, Suying still sketched drawings. She made long, smooth sweeps with her pencil across her crinkled paper, mimicking the elegant stroke of an ink brush of the watercolor painting. She imagined the artist dipping and brushing colors on the Xuan paper with nimble and expert fingers, a beautiful feeling that eased her sore body and weary mind.

At 16 years old, Suying entered a teaching school free for local students, instead of an art school that she wanted to attend but charged high tuition. She would become an elementary school teacher when she graduated.

Things were looking up for her family financially. As a teaching school student, Suying lived in the free dorm on campus and enjoyed a stipend to cover her own costs, with even some extra money for her family. Her mother left the nanny job and stayed home to sew clothes for other families in the neighborhood.

Suying came home every Saturday night and brought her sisters cookies she bought from the school cafeteria. The girls huddled around her, sharing their news and showing off their grades. They chatted and giggled like a flock of canaries.

On Sundays, she mopped the floor and washed clothes with her mother. The twins always asked her to tie their hair since she could do it neater and prettier than her mother. Suying would braid and tie their hair extra tight so it could last for a few days. Before she left for school in the evening, she dusted the painting with a feather duster and relished the elegance of its serenity for a minute.

On a Saturday night in September, when Suying twisted open the door of her home, she saw a guest, an old man with a sunken face and receding hair, sitting next to her father at the round table in the living room. He stood up and revealed a slight smile when he spotted her walking in. His hunched body carried a stench of sweat and cigarette smoke that made Suying wrinkle her nose.

Her father told her he was Uncle Shen, a distant cousin of his, from his hometown. Suying forced a smile and greeted him politely.

“Your dad sent me photos years ago and you were just a toddler in them,” Uncle Shen said with a strong accent, his teeth yellow and crooked. “Look at you now. Taller than your mother.”

Her father asked her to sit down with them. Uncle Shen scooped a palmful of red dates from the glass bowl on the table and handed them to her. “The new dates from the tree in my backyard. Very sweet.” His nails were dark with dirt.

He asked her a few questions about her school and future job, and she gave him quick answers, without eye contact. Her oldest sister called her for help with a math problem, freeing her from the uneasy conversation.

Her father resumed his chat with the uncle in a dialect Suying couldn’t understand. It was her hometown dialect that her parents had never taught her.

All her sisters were doing homework on a desk in their shared bedroom. They told her they’d rather stay inside the room all day than go to the living room with that uncle. Suying shushed them with her finger. “Don’t let him hear that,” she murmured while unwrapping a small box of pastries for them to share.

Then she went to the kitchen to help her mother with dinner. Her mother was cooking fried noodles with shredded cabbage and chopped pork, something they had only on special days. A delicious aroma wafted through the air. She asked Suying to dice several cucumbers and mix them with minced garlic and chili sauce into a cold dish, a dish Suying was particularly good at.

As she chopped the cucumbers, Suying couldn’t help thinking about the guest. “Why is Uncle Shen visiting us? I’ve never heard of him.”

Her mother removed the wok of fried noodles from the stove to the chipped wooden counter. “He’s a distant relative that we haven’t interacted much with,” her mother said softly while wiping her hands on her apron. “He has been feeling sick for a while. Abdomen pain. The

rural doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong, so he came to the city to see a doctor." She went on to transfer the steaming noodles into plates with chopsticks.

"Will he be living in our house?" Suying asked.

"Yes," her mother said, "Too expensive to stay in a hotel."

"For how long?"

"A couple of days, at least until he gets the results of the medical exam."

Suying wished she had known about the arrangement ahead of time, so she could have just stayed at school for the weekend. She felt sorry for her sisters who had to stay with the uncle for several long days and bear all the inconvenience in the cramped rooms.

That night, Suying slept with her sisters and gave her folding bed to her uncle, who set it up in the living room. She could hear his occasional coughing. Peering from the crevice between the door and the frame, she saw him standing by the window and smoking cigarette after cigarette.

The next Saturday, Suying's school had a field trip to a historical site in the suburb in the afternoon. She decided to stop at home before lunch and give her monthly savings to her parents.

Her mother was home alone sewing the hem of a new pair of navy-blue pants. Her oldest sister was studying for a math contest in her room, and the twins were playing at a friend's house. Her father went shopping with Uncle Shen.

"The pants are for Uncle Shen. He's leaving tonight," her mother said, her eyes still fixed on the sewing in her hands.

"How's the medical exam?" Suying asked.

“Not good.”

“What does the diagnosis say?”

Her mother didn't reply right away. The silence grated on Suying's nerves.

After a moment, her mother let out a sigh and put down the sewing work. She paced to Uncle Shen's worn suitcase and fished out a crumpled sheet of a handwritten diagnostic report, handing it to Suying. The doctor's scribbles were hard to recognize, and the medical jargon was too difficult to comprehend. Still, Suying could make out the words “colon cancer, stage 4.” Her chest grew tight and heavy.

“Poor guy. The cost of medical treatment will be huge. Impossible to afford. He just wants to go home,” her mother said, her voice trembling. “He went with your father to get some herbal medicine now to comfort his abdomen and relieve pain.”

A prickly lump clogged Suying's throat. She could almost imagine the helplessness he must have felt when he learned about the diagnosis.

Suying perused the report one more time, hoping to find some optimistic words about a cure or recovery. But she couldn't find any. Her eyes roamed to the name of the patient on the top—Shen Deyi. The name sounded familiar to her. Her mind groped to recall where she had seen this name before.

She remembered suddenly and rushed to the painting, pinning her eyes to the signature on the right bottom—Shen Deyi. Her mind swirled.

“Uncle Shen is the painter of that painting?” Suying questioned her mother.

Her mother nodded, pulling her eyes away from the needle in her hand and toward the painting. “That's him. He was talented, wasn't he,” she said solemnly. “But no one cherishes art in that rural area.” She continued to tell Suying how his wife had divorced him because he

couldn't make money and how he had quit painting after that and been doing all kinds of heavy work on a farm.

Suying felt a swell of disbelief and shock. What her mother just told her was so different from the graceful image of the painter that her mind had conjured countless times. She sank into a chair, listless and still, thoughts jumbled.

Suying left home before Uncle Shen was back. She didn't know how to face him and what to say to him. She set the envelope with all her savings on the table beside her mother and asked her to give it to Uncle Shen for buying nutritious food.

When winter came around and the first snow drifted down, Suying moved back home for the holidays. She and her sisters cut red papers into flowers and birds and pasted them on windows. Her mother called her sisters to try on their new clothes. Suying sat next to the window, watching a light dusting of snow coating the bare branches of the poplar tree in front of the window.

Her mind roved to Uncle Shen and his sagging face. It had been three months since he left, and they hadn't heard from him. She wondered how he was doing now. The crackling of sporadic firecrackers drummed in her ears. There were still two weeks before the spring festival, and people couldn't wait to celebrate.

The next morning, Suying took her sisters to watch lion dancing in the downtown square. When they came back, she noticed the sad expression on her parents' faces and an unfolded letter in her father's hands. "Uncle Shen passed away," he said.

At 22 years old, Suying got married to a technician who worked in an automobile factory. Her parents had introduced her to him after she graduated from teaching school, and they dated for two years. On her wedding day, her parents gave her the painting as a gift.

Suying and her husband moved into their new apartment, with shuttered windows and a narrow balcony. She hung the painting in the living room. Her husband thought the painting was too solemn and would affect the *feng shui* of the house. He wanted to change it to something more colorful, like a painting filled with peonies and butterflies.

Although she didn't like his idea, she had to admit that the painting was a mismatch with other parts of the room—the russet wooden table skirted by red padded folding chairs, the lemon-yellow vase filled with silk flowers, the teapot set etched with golden dragons and patches of clouds.

All these items were bright and cheerful, except for the painting of the misty lake, where everything was wreathed in a shade of gray, registering a bleak tone. She could almost feel the damp cold of the lake penetrating her clothes and bleeding into her skin.

Suying lifted the painting off the wall and rolled it up, wrapping it with an old cotton scarf. Pulling open the bottom drawer of the dresser, she laid the painting inside. She sat on the edge of the bed, feeling empty and numb.

After a while, she rose and poured herself a cup of jasmine tea, breathing in the subtle aroma. A mist of steam blurred her vision until it vanished in the air.