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LISA SEE

LADY TAN'S
CIRCLE

A NOVEL

OF WOMEN

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LADY TAN'S
CIRCLE
OF WOMEN

A Novel



LISA SEE

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*In memory of Marina Bokelman,
second mother, healer, folklorist, embroiderer*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story begins in 1469, in the fifth year of the Chenghua emperor's reign, when Tan Yunxian was eight years old. The title of her book has been translated different ways: *The Sayings of a Woman Doctor*, *Miscellaneous Records of a Female Doctor*, and *The Comments of a Female Physician*.

I've adhered to the English-language tradition of capitalizing certain words related to Chinese medicine that have a different semantic meaning than their lowercase equivalents, such as Blood and blood. The first system to transcribe Chinese into the Roman alphabet was created by Matteo Ricci and Michele Ruggieri between 1583 and 1588, long after the events in this novel. That being the case, I've used the Pinyin system of transliteration for Chinese words, which was adopted by the People's Republic of China in 1979 and adopted internationally in 1982.

Last, you may be unfamiliar with the traditions of Chinese medicine—and I'm not here to advocate for or against them—but I hope you'll bear in mind the larger picture of the world when the story takes place. Columbus didn't lay sight on the Americas until thirty-one years after Tan Yunxian's birth, while the English settlement of Jamestown wasn't founded until fifty-one years after her death. The western tradition of medicine at the time of Tan Yunxian's practice explained sickness as either an imbalance or a corruption of the four humors—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, which were thought to be the principal liquids of the body—or retribution for sins committed by the patient. Most western medicines were created out of alcohol and herbs, and bloodletting with leeches was the norm.

PREFACE TO *MISCELLANEOUS RECORDS OF A FEMALE DOCTOR*

Our ancient land has birthed many famous doctors, some of whom were female. It is the honor of our family lineage that my cousin Lady Tan Yunxian has produced a book of heart-mind lifesaving cases. The great physician Sun Simiao wrote, “Women are ten times more difficult to treat than a man.” This is not just a matter of yin and yang or of the outside world of men and the inner chambers where women reside. It is because women become pregnant, give birth, and endure monthly loss of blood. They also suffer from having different temperaments and emotions than men. My cousin has excelled at treating women because she has shared in the losses and joys of what it means to be a female on this earth.

Ru Luan
*Metropolitan Graduate with Honors by Imperial Order
Grand Master for Court Precedence
Manager of the Royal Lancers*

PART I

MILK DAYS

The Fifth Year of the Chenghua Emperor's Reign
(1469)



To Live Is...

“A thousand years in the past, a thousand years in the future—no matter where you live or how rich or poor you are—the four phases of a woman’s life are the same,” Respectful Lady says. “You are a little girl, so you are still in milk days. When you turn fifteen, you will enter hair-pinning days. The way we style your hair will announce to the world that you are ready for marriage.” She smiles at me. “Tell me, Daughter, what comes next?”

“Rice-and-salt days,” I answer dutifully, but my mind wanders. My mother and I sit together on porcelain stools under a covered colonnade in our home’s courtyard. It’s monsoon season, so the sliver of sky I can see is heavy with clouds, making the air feel humid, suffocating. Two miniature orange trees grow side by side in matching pots. Other containers hold cymbidiums, their stalks drooping under the weight of the blossoms. Rain is coming, but until then, birds titter in the ginkgo tree that provides a touch of coolness on the summer day, and I can smell the sea—something I’ve only seen in paintings. The fragrance doesn’t, however, cover the unpleasant odor coming from Respectful Lady’s bound feet.

“Your thoughts are elsewhere.” Her voice sounds as frail as her body looks. “You must pay attention.” She reaches over and takes one of my hands. “Are you having pain today?” When I nod, she says, “The memories of the agony you felt during your footbinding will never leave completely. There will be days from now until you die when the anguish will visit—if you’ve stood too long or walked too far, if the weather is about to change, if you don’t take proper care of your feet.” She squeezes my hand sympathetically. “When they throb or smart, remind yourself that one day your suffering will be proof to your husband of your love. Focusing on something else will distract you from the pain.”

My mother is wise, which is why everyone in the household, including my brother, Yifeng, and I, calls her Respectful Lady, the honorary title she carries as the wife of someone with my father’s high rank. But if she can tell I’m distracted, then I can see she is too. The sound of a woman singing

reaches us. Miss Zhao, my father's concubine, must be entertaining my father and his guests.

"You know how to concentrate... when you want to," my mother goes on at last. "This ability—to be fully absorbed—is what saves us." She pauses for a moment as male laughter—my father's voice distinct in the appreciative choir—swirls around us like a fog. Then she asks, "Shall we continue?"

I take a breath. "Rice-and-salt days are the most important years in a woman's life. They are when I will be busy with wife and mother duties—"

"As I am now." Respectful Lady gracefully tips her head, setting the gold and jade ornaments that hang from her bun to tinkle softly. How pale she is, how elegant. "Each day should begin early. I rise before dawn, cleanse my face, rinse my mouth with fragrant tea, attend to my feet, and fix my hair and makeup. Then I go to the kitchen to make sure the servants have lit the fire and begun the morning meal."

She releases my hand and sighs, as though exhausted by the effort of getting so many words to leave her mouth. She takes a deep breath before continuing. "Memorizing these responsibilities is central to your education, but you can also learn by observing as I supervise the chores that must be done each day: bringing in fuel and water, sending a big-footed servant girl to the market, making sure clothes—including those of Miss Zhao—are washed, and so many other things that are essential to managing a household. Now, what else?"

She's been teaching me like this for four years already, and I know the answer she likes me to give. "Learning to embroider, play the zither, and memorize sayings from *Analects for Women*—"

"And other texts too, so that by the time you go to your husband's home, you will have an understanding of all you must do and all you must avoid." She shifts on her stool. "Eventually, you will reach the time of sitting quietly. Do you know what this means?"

Maybe it's because I'm feeling physical pain, but the thought of the sadness and loneliness of sitting quietly causes tears to well in my eyes. "This will come when I can no longer bring children into the world—"

"And extends into widowhood. You will be the one who has not died, waiting for death to reunite you with your husband. This is—"

A maid arrives with a tray of snacks, so my mother and I can continue our studies through lunch without a break. Two hours later, Respectful Lady

asks me to repeat the rules we've covered.

"When walking, don't turn my head," I recite without protest. "When talking, don't open my mouth wide. When standing, don't rustle my skirts. When happy, don't rejoice with loud laughter. When angry, never raise my voice. I will bury all desire to venture beyond the inner chambers. Those rooms are for women alone."

"Very good," Respectful Lady praises me. "Always remember your place in the world. If you follow these rules, you will establish yourself as a true and proper human being." She closes her eyes. She's hurting too. Only she's too much of a lady to speak of it.

A squeal from my little brother interrupts our shared moment. Yifeng runs across the courtyard. His mother, Miss Zhao—free of her performing duties—glides behind him. Her feet are also bound, and her steps are so small they give the impression she's floating like...

"Like a ghost," my mother whispers as though she's read my thoughts.

Yifeng flings himself at my mother, buries his face in her lap, and giggles. Miss Zhao may be his mother by birth, but Respectful Lady not only is his ritual mother but has formally adopted him as her son. This means Yifeng will make offerings and perform all the rites and ceremonies after my mother and our father become ancestors in the Afterworld.

My mother pulls Yifeng onto her lap, brushing the bottoms of his shoes so the soles leave no dirt or dust on her silk gown.

"That is all, Miss Zhao."

"Respectful Lady." The concubine gives a polite nod and then quietly slips out of the courtyard.

My mother turns to the afternoon's teaching session, which Yifeng and I share. We will spend each day learning together until he reaches his seventh year, when the *Book of Rites* orders that boys and girls should not sit on the same mat or eat at the same table. At that time, Yifeng will leave our company and move to the library to spend his hours with private tutors in preparation to take the imperial exams.

"Harmony should be maintained in a household, but everyone knows how hard this is," Respectful Lady begins. "After all, the written character for *trouble* is composed of the character for *roof* with the characters for *two women* under it, while the character of *one woman* under a roof means..."

"Peace," I answer.

"Good. A pig under a roof means..."

“*Prison.*”

“There is no written character with a man under a roof. Whether animal or woman, we are a man’s possessions. We women exist to give him heirs and feed, clothe, and amuse him. Never forget that.”

While my brother recites simple poems, I work on my embroidery. I hope I’m successful at hiding my disappointment. I know Miss Zhao wasn’t the only one entertaining my father and his friends. Yifeng was also being shown off. Now, when he forgets a line, Respectful Lady glances at me to complete it for him. In this way, I’m learning what he’s learning too. I’m older, so I’m much better at memorizing. I’m even good at using words and images from poems in my thoughts and when I talk. Today, though, I stumble on a line. Respectful Lady purses her lips. “You will not take the imperial exams or become a scholar like your brother,” she points out, “but one day you will be the mother of sons. To help them in their future studies, you must learn now.” It stings to disappoint her when, on a good day, I can recite poems from the *Book of Odes* and read aloud from the *Classic of Filial Piety for Girls*. Today is not one of those days.

In the late afternoon, my mother announces it’s time to move to the studio. Yifeng and I follow Respectful Lady at a proper distance. The folds of her gown billow, and her sleeves are picked up on the breeze—just like in a painting. The air moves enough that we are awash in the odor that comes from her bound feet. A special aroma will eventually come from my own feet, my mother likes to remind me when I cry during my binding, and it will fascinate my husband. Today, the scent from my mother’s feet is far from pleasing. I swallow hard as a wave of nausea washes through me.

I have no memories of ever being outside our compound, and I may not pass through the main gate until I’m in my hair-pinning days and am taken to my husband’s home in marriage, but I don’t care. I love our home, especially the studio, with its whitewashed walls, simple furniture, and shelves filled with books and handscrolls. My mother sits on one side of the table; my brother and I sit across from her. My mother watches as I grind the ink on the inkstone and mix in water to achieve the perfect density and blackness. I hold my brush in one hand and with my other hand pull my sleeve up and back so it won’t get stained. Respectful Lady has said that each calligraphy stroke must be fluid, yet bold. Beside me, Yifeng tries his best, but his characters are wobbly. Checking his work causes *me* to make my second mistake of the day. Instead of my stroke thinning like the end of

an eyebrow, I make a blot on the paper. I lift the brush but keep my face down, staring at the mess I've made and waiting for my mother to say something.

The silence continues, and I glance up. She gazes out the window, oblivious to me, my mistake, or Yifeng's wiggling. When she's like this, we know she's thinking about my two older brothers, who died on the same day five years ago from heavenly flowers disease—smallpox. If they'd survived, they would be ten and twelve years old. And if they'd lived, my father might not have brought in Miss Zhao, I wouldn't have Yifeng as my younger brother, and my mother wouldn't have a ritual son.

My maid, Poppy, enters, and Respectful Lady gives a small nod. Without inspecting my work, she says, "That's enough for today. Poppy, please have the children change and then bring them to the library to see their father."

Poppy takes my brother to Miss Zhao, and then the two of us continue to my room. Father bought Poppy for me on the occasion of my birth. She's fifteen, with big feet. Her eyes are set wide on her face, and she has an obedient disposition. She sleeps on the floor at the foot of my bed and many times has comforted me when I've been awakened by a nightmare. She helps me to dress, wash, and eat. I don't know where Poppy comes from, but she'll be part of my dowry, which means we'll be together until whichever one of us dies first.

Having sat nearly all day, I'm antsy, but Poppy will have none of it.

"Yunxian, you are worse than your brother," she scolds. "Stand still so I can brush your hair."

"But—"

She holds up a finger. "No!" She gives me a stern look, but it quickly turns into a grin. She spoils me. It's true. "So, tell me what you learned today."

I do my best, reciting the usual things: "When I marry, I will respectfully serve my father-in-law. I will not look at him when he speaks to me. I will not address him, ever. I will listen and obey."

Poppy noisily sucks her teeth to let me know she approves, but my mind is chewing on something Respectful Lady said earlier today. *Always remember your place in the world.* I was born into the Tan family. My given name is Yunxian, which means Loyal Virtue. Medicine has been in my family for generations, but my father chose a different path. He's an imperial scholar of the *juren* level—a "recommended man," who has passed

the provincial exams. He works as a prefect here in Laizhou, which is close to the ocean but hundreds of *li* from our family's ancestral home in Wuxi. For longer than my lifetime, he's been studying to take the next and highest level of the imperial examinations, which take place every three years. The geomancer has already chosen a date for Father to travel to the capital, where he'll complete his final studies before the testing begins. If he succeeds, the emperor himself will read my father's essay, announce that he's achieved the level of *jinshi* scholar—a "presented scholar"—and award him his title. I don't know how our lives will change if that happens, except that our family will have taken another step up the ladder of life.

What else can I say about my place in the world? I am eight years old, young enough that I still wear my black hair in ribboned tufts. Respectful Lady has told me that my complexion is as fine as the flesh of a white peach, but that can't be true since she has Poppy apply ointments to the three pockmarks—one high on my forehead and two side by side on my right cheek—that are visible reminders that I survived smallpox while my brothers didn't. My feet make up for these defects. They are perfect. Today I wear a pair of silk slippers embroidered by my mother with flowers and bats for good luck.

Poppy nudges me. "And your relations with your future mother-in-law?"

"Yes, yes," I say, snapping back to my maid. "When she sits, I will remain standing. I will rise early, but I won't make any noise that could disturb her sleep. I will prepare and serve tea to her—"

Poppy pats my bottom, satisfied that I'm ready to be presented to my father. "That's enough. Let's hurry now. We don't want to upset the master."

We retrace our steps, picking up Yifeng from the room he shares with Miss Zhao. The three of us walk hand in hand. The rain has finally started, but we're protected by the colonnade. The drops hitting the tile roof sound comforting, and already the air feels cleaner, lighter, as the humidity is washed out of it.

In the library, my parents sit next to each other in simply carved chairs. An altar table rests against the white wall behind them. A summer orchid blooms from a bronze pot. Respectful Lady's hands lie folded in her lap. Her feet are propped on a brocade footrest, and her slippers, as small as my own, peek out from under her gown. Respectful Lady is always pale, but today her skin appears almost translucent. A light sheen of sweat glistens on her forehead and upper lip.

My father seems unaffected by the odor coming from my mother's feet. He sits with his legs spread and his hands on his thighs, so his fingers point inward and his thumbs rest outward. He wears the long, layered robes of his rank. The sleeve guards that edge the hems of his tunic are heavily embroidered. A mandarin square, also embroidered, covers his chest and tells all who see him his grade within the imperial system of civil servants. He motions for Yifeng to come to him. Poppy drops his hand, and Yifeng darts across the floor and jumps into our father's lap. I would never do that. I lost the ability to run when my feet were bound, but even if I could run, it would be inappropriate for me to act so recklessly. My father laughs. My mother smiles. Poppy squeezes my hand reassuringly.

After five minutes, the visit ends. My father has not said a word to me. I'm not hurt. We've both behaved in the proper way. I can be proud of that. Poppy retakes Yifeng's hand. We're about to leave when my mother suddenly rises. She sways like a stalk of young bamboo in a spring wind. My father glances at her questioning. Before he can say a word, she collapses to the floor. Apart from her hands, which lie splayed and limp, and her face, which is as white as a full moon, she looks like a pile of discarded clothing.

Poppy screams. My father leaps from his chair, lifts my mother into his arms, and carries her outside. As he trots down the colonnade, he shouts for other servants to come. They arrive from every corner, including a man and a boy of about twelve. They are only the fifth and sixth males I have ever seen. They must live here, but I've been isolated in the inner chambers, where I've been protected from the eyes of boys and men apart from my father, Yifeng, and the two brothers I barely remember.

"Take my horse and fetch the doctor!" Father orders. "Bring hot water! No! Bring cold water! Compresses! And find Miss Zhao!"

The old man and the boy break away, as do the cook and the kitchen scullery maid. When Father reaches my mother's room, the remaining servants and I follow him inside. Respectful Lady's marriage bed is big and spacious—like a little house, with three small rooms—to give utmost privacy. A moon-shaped archway leads to the sleeping platform. Father lays Respectful Lady on the quilt, sets her arms by her sides, and straightens her gown so the silk drapes over her feet. Then he smooths the tendrils of hair that have come loose from her bun and tucks them behind her ears.

“Wake up, Wife,” he pleads. I’ve never heard him speak so tenderly, not even to Yifeng. He glances back at the rest of us crowded into the marriage bed’s first antechamber. “Where is Miss Zhao? Get her!”

A couple of servants run out, while others enter with hot and cold buckets of water.

At last, Miss Zhao arrives. She touches Father’s shoulder. “It’s best if you leave.” She turns to the servants. “All of you too, except for Yunxian.”

My father regards me. I see in his expression something new, but I’m unsure what it is.

“Maybe I should take the girl,” he says to his concubine.

“Leave her here. She needs to learn.” Miss Zhao puts a hand on the small of his back. “Let us know when the doctor arrives.”

Once everyone has left, Miss Zhao looks at me squarely, which is yet another thing that has never happened before. “I suspected this would happen,” she says. “We can hope that by fainting Respectful Lady has given us time to help her.”

“But what’s wrong?” I ask timidly.

“I’ve been told your mother took great care with your footbinding, choosing to do it with her own hands. Too often a mother can turn sentimental when her daughter cries, but not Respectful Lady. She did everything correctly, and not once did your feet become infected. Now you know how to take care of your feet—”

“Poppy helps me—”

“But you understand that maintenance is required.”

“Unbind the feet every four days,” I begin to recite, knowing these rules are no less important than those for the stages of my life or how to behave toward my future mother-in-law. “Wash them. Trim the toenails and sand down any places where a bone might break through the skin—”

“Whether toenails or a shard of bone, if the skin breaks, you must take extra care to keep the wound clean. Otherwise, you will get an infection. If you ignore it, the bound foot—unable to find fresh air—will begin to fester. Some mothers take this risk when binding their daughters’ feet.” Some of the pride I feel in my feet falls away when she adds, “The person who bound my feet allowed this to happen and was able to break off my dead toes. This is why my feet are so very small, and it is something your father appreciates.”

Now is not the time to crow, but I can’t possibly say that to Miss Zhao.

“My point is,” she goes on, “infection can set in, and if a mother isn’t vigilant, then her daughter will probably die. But little girls aren’t the only ones who can perish. Adult women who don’t properly care for their feet can also succumb.”

With that, Miss Zhao pulls Respectful Lady’s gown up to reveal the embroidered leggings that cover the unsightly bulge of the bent heel and crushed arch. This lump of useless and unappealing flesh is supposed to remain hidden, and seeing it reminds me of something Respectful Lady told me during my binding: “Our feet don’t shrink or disappear. The bones are simply moved and manipulated to create the illusion of golden lilies.”

Miss Zhao unties one of the leggings and pulls it free to expose fiery rivers of red that streak up my mother’s leg. What startles me even more is the look of her calf. It is as thin as rope, far more slender and formless than mine. I reach out to touch what looks so clearly wrong, but Miss Zhao grabs my wrist and pulls me back. She picks up one of my mother’s feet. It looks tiny in her hand.

“Our legs become emaciated because our feet cannot carry what lies beneath the skin,” Miss Zhao states. “This is nothing to worry about. The problem is, your mother has an infection.”

I struggle to make sense of this. Respectful Lady is respectful in all ways, including in the care of her body. She would never ignore her feet.

“I’m going to unwrap her foot,” Miss Zhao explains. “Are you ready?”

When I nod, Miss Zhao slips off the shoe and hands it to me. The smell worsens. The concubine swallows, and then proceeds to unwind the three-meter length of gauze binding cloth. With each layer removed, the smell of decay gets stronger. When Miss Zhao gets closer to the skin, the cloth comes away stained yellow and green. Finally, the foot is naked. A jagged sliver of bone protrudes from the left side of the midfoot. Freed from the bindings—and I can’t imagine the pain my mother must have been experiencing—the foot swells before our eyes.

“Get the bucket.”

I do as I’m told. Miss Zhao gently moves my mother’s leg so it dangles off the side of the bed and places her foot in the water. My mother stirs but doesn’t waken.

“Go to Respectful Lady’s dressing table and bring me her ointments and powders.”

I do as I'm told. My father's concubine shakes some of the same astringent Poppy uses on my feet into the water. It's made from ground mulberry root, tannin, and frankincense. By the time the doctor arrives, Miss Zhao and I have patted dry my mother's foot, sprinkled alum between the toes and over the injury, and set it on a pillow. My mother has stirred each time we've moved her, but she has yet to open her eyes.

"You stay here," Miss Zhao says. "I'll talk to your father to see how he wants to proceed. A male doctor may not see or touch a female patient. A go-between is needed. Often the husband is chosen, but I will volunteer."

As soon as she's gone, my mother's eyes flutter open. "I do not want that woman in my room," she says weakly. "Go out there. Tell your father that she cannot be the go-between."

I step into the corridor. It's still raining, and I gulp in the fresh air. Even so, the smell of my mother's rotting flesh clings to the back of my throat. My father and Miss Zhao speak to a man who must be the doctor. I have now seen my seventh male. He wears a long robe in dark blue fabric. His gray hair laps at the curve of his stooped shoulders. I'm afraid to approach, but I must. I walk up to my father, pull on his sleeve, and say, "Respectful Lady is awake, and she asks that I be the go-between."

The man I take to be the doctor says, "Prefect Tan, it would be proper for you to do this duty." But when my father's eyes brim with tears, the doctor turns to Miss Zhao. "I suspect you have some experience with the ailments that afflict women."

I am only a girl, but I must honor my mother's wishes. "Respectful Lady wants—"

My father slaps the back of his hand against his other palm to stop me from saying another word. Silently he weighs the possibilities. Then he speaks.

"Doctor Ho, you will use my daughter." Father looks down at me. "You repeat exactly what the doctor says to your mother and what your mother says back to the doctor. Do you understand?"

I nod solemnly. His decision reflects his love for my mother. I'm sure of it.

The adults exchange a few more words, and then my father is led away by Miss Zhao.

The doctor asks me a series of questions, which I take to Respectful Lady. She answers, "No, I have not eaten spicy foods. You can tell him my

sleep is fine. I am not suffering from excessive emotions.”

I go back and forth between Doctor Ho in the colonnade and my mother in her bed. The questions—and the responses—seem to have little to do with my mother’s infection. That she doesn’t volunteer these details puzzles me.

After the doctor is satisfied, he writes a prescription. The scullery maid is sent to a pharmacy to pick up the herbs for the formula. The cook brews the decoction, and a few hours later, when it’s ready, it’s brought to my mother’s room. I lift the cup to her lips, and she takes a few sips before falling back on her pillow.

“It’s late,” she says in a soft voice. “You should go to bed.”

“Let me stay here. I can hold the cup for you.”

She turns her head to face the wooden panels on the back wall of the marriage bed. Her fingers press against one of them, idly wiggling it in its frame. “I will have finished the drink by the time you’ve washed your face.”

I go to my room, change into bedclothes and sleeping slippers, lie down, and nestle between the goose-down-filled mattress and a cotton quilt. I’m drained by all I’ve seen and find myself drifting off to sleep. I don’t know how much time has passed before I’m awakened abruptly by the sound of people running. In the gloom, I see Poppy sit up and yawn. She lights the oil lamp. The sputtering flame casts dancing shadows on the walls. We quickly dress and go out to the corridor. The rain has stopped, but it’s dark. The birds singing in the trees tell me dawn is coming.

Just as we reach Respectful Lady’s room, Cook rushes out and turns so swiftly that she nearly crashes into us. I totter on my bound feet, thrown off-balance. I place a hand on the wall to steady myself. When she sees me, she wipes tears from her cheeks with the backs of her hands. “So sorry. So sorry.”

The household is thrown into more commotion as Miss Zhao crosses the courtyard with Doctor Ho behind her. Without pausing, they enter Respectful Lady’s room. I start forward. Cook says, “Don’t go in there.” But I slip past her and through the door. The smell is something I will never forget.

A curtain has been hung over the front of the third chamber of my mother’s marriage bed. My father sits on a stool before it. My mother’s bare arm rests in his lap, the palm facing the ceiling. Doctor Ho tells my father to

wrap Respectful Lady's wrist in a linen handkerchief. Once my father finishes this task, the doctor steps forward and places three fingers on the cloth. He closes his eyes to concentrate, but how can he feel anything through the handkerchief?

I look away and glimpse the cup I held up to my mother last night. My heart thumps in my chest as I realize she never took another sip.

Over the next two days, the entire household is busy. Servants come and go. More herbs are brewed for "invigorating" teas. I'm once again sent in to ask Doctor Ho's questions and return to him with Respectful Lady's answers. Nothing helps. Respectful Lady continues to weaken. When I touch her hand or cheek, I feel burning heat. Her foot, still balanced atop the pillow, has grown to the size of a melon. Rather, a cracked melon that oozes foul-smelling fluids. A prized characteristic of a perfectly bound foot is the cleft formed when the toes come back to meet the heel of the foot. Ideally, it should be so deep that a large silver coin can slide into the crevice. Now bloody goo drips from the slit, while the red streaks have continued to climb up her leg. As the hours pass, Respectful Lady becomes less interested in the words that shower down on her, turning her face to the back wall of her enclosed bed. I'm allowed to stand next to her, to comfort her and let her know she's not alone.

She mumbles names. "Mama. Baba." When she cries out for my brothers who died, my index finger seeks out the heavenly flowers scars on my face.

On the fourth night, Father, Miss Zhao, and Yifeng enter. Tears stain Miss Zhao's powdered cheeks. Even when her face shows sorrow, she is still beautiful. My father chews on the insides of his cheeks, reining in his emotions. Yifeng is too young to understand what's happening and gallops toward the bed. My father scoops him up before he can disturb our mother. Respectful Lady raises an arm and touches my brother's boot.

"Remember me, Son. Make offerings for me."

After the threesome leaves, only Respectful Lady, our two maids, and I remain. The lamps are trimmed low. The gentle *plink-plink* of rain on the roof fills the room. My mother's breathing slows. A breath, then a long pause. A breath, then a long pause. Again, the names of those gone fall from her lips. I don't know if she's looking for them or if she's responding to their calls to her from their home in the Afterworld.

Suddenly she turns to face me. Her eyes open wide. For the first time in hours, she's fully *here*.

“Come closer.” She reaches for me. I take her hand and lean in to hear. “I lament that life is like a sunbeam passing through a crack in a wall and that I won’t live to see you become a wife and mother. We won’t have the sorrows of partings or the joys of reunions. I won’t be able to help you when you have disappointments or rejoice with you in moments of good fortune.”

She once again closes her eyes and lets her head fall away from me. She doesn’t release my hand. Instead, even as she murmurs the names of the dead, she squeezes it and I squeeze back.

“To live is to suffer,” she mutters. This is her last coherent sentence. She cries, “Mama, Mama, Mama.” She mumbles my brother’s name. “Yifeng. Yifeng. Come!” She does not call for me.

I’m exhausted, but I continue to stand vigil despite the ache I feel in my feet. As tired as I am, I want to share in her pain. Mother to daughter. Life to death.

In the deepest darkness of the night, Respectful Lady takes her last breath, having reached twenty-eight years of age. I’m nearly overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness and guilt. I should have *been* more—a son of Respectful Lady’s own blood who would be worth living for. I should have been able to *do* more to help her.