A Princess from Kwangtung

I am a beautiful princess.

A beautiful princess, that is what I am. A beautiful princess far from my home. An exile, a hostage – that is what I am. A vassal prince's daughter. Another captive beauty in the halls of the great lord. A living trophy. A beautiful slave.

I live in an enormous palace: hundreds of rooms, hundreds of servants, hundreds of visitors daily; everywhere pretty lanterns, ugly portraits, carved animals, embroidered curtains, flowers and scented water, and oh, the beautiful beautiful clothes. The palace is extremely clean, with floors of shiny polished wood and patterned marble, and huge carpets with pictures of dragons. I was amazed to find it so, I had never seen such large rooms nor dreamed that any building could have so many. And wide doorways with men that guard them, or open them for you. And long clean corridors that never seem to end. The palace is a whole city.

It is all so different from where I came from. For I was brought a great distance to live here, at the emperor's particular command, a princess whose beauty he had been told of by travellers, but did not believe. A tribute demanded of my people. He sent over a thousand miles, to the distant southern land of Kwangtung, a land of farms and rivers, where our palaces are smaller and our floors are not so clean. Oh I love my homeland, it is the most beautiful place on earth, I was very happy there; it breaks my heart to think of it now it is so far away. But I never saw anything there like this palace, and these ladies, and all their clothes and shoes and jewels; it takes my breath away.

Everyone you can think of they have here by the hundred: apothecaries and astrologers, soldiers and stone polishers, doctors and dressmakers, librarians and lute players, music teachers, language teachers, dance teachers. And the part where I am is full of noble ladies and painted courtesans, willowy dancing girls and the emperor's precious concubines, a thousand of each (so they say), immaculately dressed and decorated, weighed down with sparkling ornaments, and so gracious in their every movement. I love to look at them in their beautiful clothes; I watch the grand ladies and pretty girls as they scuttle along the corridors. I see their dainty feet and their bejewelled shoes. Oh how I dream of having shoes like theirs ...

For I am not a princess really. It is just a daydream of mine: a dream I grew up with. My father always called me his princess. I grew up knowing I was. A princess of the lush green farmlands where I scampered free, the pearly rivulets and the swaying willow trees. I danced in happiness at the lovely land I was princess of. For *that* is

what I am, a dancer. To dance with the grandeur of a tree, the lightness of a kite. I grew up knowing my destiny: a skilful and graceful dancer, a princess among dancers.

I *was* brought from the lovely farmlands in the south. My family's land is well watered and fertile, and because I was bright and beautiful and willowy they sent me to the finest dancing school in the province, where the teacher considered me her prize pupil. Even at a tender age my fame spread. What an honour, when the great entourage from the palace arrived to fetch me, at the emperor's particular command, a dancer whose skill and beauty he had been told of by travellers, but did not believe. My parents received a pension for me, and will never ache from work nor shiver in wintertime again.

To dance for our emperor, to be loved for my beauty and grace – it is a dream come true. For I love to dance, above all things that is what I love. I study and exercise and practise very hard. It is painfully strenuous, but it is all built on grace and poise. My back and legs ache terribly most of the time. But the pain must not show, nor the sweat. We learn the art of making it look easy. We are feathers blowing in a breeze. We paint pictures in pose and motion. It requires much control. The blink of an eye, the position of a finger, your stillness, are just as important as any larger movement.

And oh the exquisite clothes and jewellery and makeup: it is just what I dreamed of. The beauty and elegance of it all; the richness, the wonder. I am entranced by it. I love to watch the dancing girls when they are practising, to peep at them combing their hair, and dressing. I see them running along the corridors. I wait to catch them. I get in trouble for it: chamberlains kick me; my housekeeper scuffs me round the ear for pausing from my work ...

For I am not a dancer really. I had hoped to be. My parents *did* get me lessons from a lady in the village, I think they exchanged cabbages for them. And I practise still, when I can. Or at least I watch, when I can steal an opportunity. My back and legs ache too much most of the time, from all the crawling. But I close my eyes tightly and imagine myself standing and stretching and moving with the dancers. I learn a great deal by watching: I know all the dances in my mind.

But I am just a cleaning maid. Even that is not true. I am what is called a menial. We spend all day crouching and crawling on the floors, sweeping and dusting and polishing and scrubbing. Our backs and legs ache terribly most of the time. We work and sleep, we are dirty, we are not beautiful. Our clothes are rags and our feet are bare. That is what I am. A menial is the lowest of all servants. But the floor squad is not the lowest of the lowest. If we are disobedient or do not work hard there is always the latrine squad.

I wish I *was* a cleaning maid, cleaning furniture and curtains, making beds or lighting fires; crouching down to do it – and then standing up. Or better still a personal maid, to attend a pretty concubine at her toilet, to help a dancer with her dressing and hair-combing and makeup. I have seen them, through half open doors, coming from their baths to be powdered and preened by their maids. That would be a nice enough thing to be, if I cannot be a dancer. Perhaps if I am very obedient they may permit it.

Well, if I could improve myself they might. I know I would have to be better spoken, and more conversant with dressing and etiquette. I would really need to be from what they call better parents. I do know of menials who have been promoted to kitchen maids; but I realise the ladies' maids and dressers generally come from quite refined families. As do all the dancers, of course. While many of the concubines really *are* princesses from distant lands.

The farmlands of Kwangtung are fertile and beautiful, I did not lie about that. But I am just a peasant girl, the youngest of my family. I grew up very happy and very poor. I suppose my father sold me. Rural families are always poor and large, but of course children die – it is expected. Mine was blessed with good health and only one of my five sisters had died before I left; so with their two boys growing into farm workers and older girls to do marriage deals with, my parents had daughters to spare. They will have been thinking of the wellbeing of the whole family. They were kind and loving. I know of families who killed their surplus girl children, it is an old custom. It is not true, that they did not love me.

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I have heard there is a legend. It tells of the heart of an emperor being won by a servant girl, so beautiful that ragged and downtrodden as she was, she effortlessly outshone every one of the ladies of the palace. Her beauty was said to put the emperor's finest concubines to shame.

So natural and radiant her loveliness (and so sweet her nature, I like to think) that people simply could not help noticing her as she worked about the palace. And eventually everyone spoke of her, until the great emperor could stand it no longer.

I am sick of hearing of this servant girl, this ragged beauty who puts my finest concubines to shame, he said to his greatest artist; go and look at her face, and report back to me that she is plain, or at best nothing more than pretty. The artist sought her out at her chores, looked at her face, and returning to his emperor in tears and dread, bowed at his feet and said: Execute me for disobeying you if you will, but I have just laid eyes upon the most beautiful face that nature or art ever made, and furthermore, I tried to sketch it for you and failed, so

profound is its loveliness. Of course the emperor did not execute him; but he was not satisfied.

A face is but the small part we see of a person, most of which is hidden by clothing, he said to his most trusted noble lady; go and look at her body, and report to me that she is fat or bony or malproportioned, or at least that she has unsightly blemishes. The lady sought her out at her chores, compelled her to undress and viewed her bare body, and returning to her emperor in tears and dread, bowed at his feet and said: Execute me for disobeying you if you will, but I have just had sight of the most perfect body that woman was ever endowed withal, unblemished but for a cute freckle or two, and furthermore it is graceful and willowy. Of course the emperor did not execute her; but he was not satisfied.

A face and body are but the vehicle for a woman's godgiven function, to satisfy men and perpetuate the race, he said to his empresses' senior midwife; go and look at her female parts, and report to me that she is unwholesome or barren, or worse still unvirtuous. The midwife sought her out at her chores, persuaded her to let her examine her private parts, and returning to her emperor in tears and dread, bowed at his feet and said: Execute me for disobeying you if you will, but I have just examined the most wholesome and functional private parts that a young girl could hope to possess, untouched by any before me, and furthermore they are quite pretty. Of course the emperor did not execute her; but he was not satisfied.

A face and figure and female parts are all very well, but they do not make a woman good company for a great emperor, my concubines are all skilled in conversation and variously intelligent or inquisitive or witty, he said to their chief tutor; go and examine her conversation, and report to me that she is brainless and boring, or else that she lacks wit or the capacity to attain knowledge. The tutor sought her out at her chores, talked with her in assessment of her conversation and intellect, and returning to his emperor in tears and dread, bowed at his feet and said: Execute me for disobeying you if you will, but I have just conversed with a young lady who has had little opportunity for education yet is as bright in her mind and witty in her speech as any I ever met, and what few things I imparted as we talked she understood and remembered, and furthermore she is eager to learn more. Of course the emperor did not execute him; but he was not satisfied.

A face and figure and female parts, and the capacity to learn and converse, are shared by every one of my concubines, in order to outshine them she must presumably have some particular accomplishment in which she excells, he said to his commissioners for arts and entertainments; go to her and examine her purported skill or art, and report back to me that she is talentless, or at best that any special gift she may claim is mediocre. The commissioners sought her out at her chores, and asked her if she would demonstrate for them

some talent or accomplishment in which she believed she excelled, and returning to their emperor in tears and dread, bowed at his feet and their spokesman said: Execute us for disobeying you if you will, but we have just discovered the world's most graceful and naturally talented dancer (I expect it was) – we saw her dance and were spellbound, no accomplishment like it has ever graced your majesty's court before.

Aha, cried the emperor, I have caught her out. For face and figure and female parts, and engaging conversation and some special talent at which she excells, are not going to win any *man's adoration if they are the wrapping around a personality that is* not *demure and sweet and modest. Of course I shall not execute you, for you have reported a great imperfection to me – her immodest claim to genius in dancing – and I am satisfied.*

The great counsellors muttered among themselves as they withdrew, and then their spokesman returned and bowed again, and begged to inform the emperor – even if it meant being executed, he said, but they must speak the truth – that when they asked her the emperor's question she bowed her head demurely, and denied not only that she had any special talent but also that she was any of the things people say of her; only on being questioned more sternly did she sweetly admit her fondness for dancing, and that she would quite like to have been a dancer if her fate had not made her a servant girl; but she modestly declined to dance for them. Someone told us, however, that in what slight leisure-time a servant girl has, she watches the dancers and then practises their dances privately; and so we hid in the place where she practises and peeped through a lattice. And that is how we came to be privileged to witness the most beautiful dancing our eyes have ever seen or our hearts could bear to – but she did not know we were watching her.

The emperor did not execute them.

He sent for the girl and offered her membership of his honourable harem of concubines; she declined it and asked only for a pair of dancing slippers. Which he granted, but his heart was not satisfied.

He sent for her again and offered her the place of his chief concubine, his mistress; she declined it and asked only for a pretty dancing costume. Which he granted, but his heart found no rest.

He sent for her and offered to make her his fifth empress; she declined it and asked only for some ribbons and imitation jewels to hang about her hair. Which he granted, in fact, the jewels he gave her were real and very precious, though he did not tell her so for fear she might refuse them; and now his heart yearned without ceasing.

He sent for her and offered to renounce all other women in favour of her, his sole companion and empress; she declined it and asked only to

be allowed a few days off from menial work to train and practise with the dancers. Which he granted, but his heart now banished all thoughts but of her.

He sent for her again and offered to make her joint ruler of his empire, joint owner of his wealth, joint executor of his power; she declined it all and asked only to be granted the honour of dancing for him in her new slippers and pretty costume, her hair decorated with ribbons and jewels, so as to demonstrate how well she had learned the dances on the days he had allowed her for practising. Which he granted, and the servant girl danced for her emperor; and his heart thereafter was tempestuous with love for her every second of every day and night, until he could bear it no longer.

And so it was that a great emperor went to a servant girl in tears and dread, bowed at her feet, and begged her to say what he must offer her for her love: what more could she want? was the position of the greatest woman in the world not enough?

This was her reply. You have not offered me the one thing I should like, and even though I know it is already mine, I should like you to offer it.

What do you mean? said the emperor.

If I have not your heart*, howsoever great a lady you dress me up as I am nothing but a servant girl who has been noticed by an emperor; but if you give me your heart, I am the greatest lady in the world no matter that I wear the rags of a servant girl, for I am truly beloved of a man.*

The great emperor was so humbled (or so the legend tells) that he bestowed upon her this greatest treasure of all, and out of love for her even renounced his empire, his young son succeeding as emperor in his stead, while he and the servant girl walked the long walk of vagabonds until they reached her parents' smallholding; and there they lived out their days as poor peasants, giving their hearts and bodies each to the other without embellishment, blissful in the possession of one another's love.

I may have elaborated it a little. It seems to gain in detail as I think of it hour upon hour while crawling about the floors. I cannot get it out of my mind, as if it were part of my own destiny. I do not know which emperor it was that this happened to. I had thought it must be – for are not legends? – a story of the past. But what if legends could in reality be stories about the future?

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A beautiful princess. That is what I am. Even as I ache and crawl! A beautiful dancing princess. What dreams I dream in my dusty rags! I *am* beautiful though. At least, everyone tells me I am. I would not

mention it otherwise, but it is always being remarked upon. Even here, even a drudge on the floor.

It was why the grand lady who finds dancers noticed me. She came to the dancing class in the village one day. She is very beautiful, I think she said, or perhaps it was fairly pretty – she was speaking mandarin. She is very beautiful, that scruffy one there; but a trifle young, she added. She is just a peasant girl, my dancing teacher replied, apologetically. I teach her for a pittance because of her natural grace; she *will* make a dancer, but unfortunately for your highness's purpose, she is just a peasant girl. Oh well: I could take her as a menial, now she has caught my eye, said the grand lady; make her father the usual offer.

I hoped a menial – it was another mandarin word – was like a trainee or protégée, an adopted neice. Perhaps she would be nice to me, as my dance teacher herself was. She let me practise as long as I liked, she hardly ever slapped me, and she also began teaching me reading. I thought it a punishment at the time, but now I realise it was a kindness indeed, for I love to read; I wish I could return and thank her. No one in my family could ever read, and none of the lower servants here would even think of it. Of course I am not very good, especially as all written words are pure mandarin. It makes writing more difficult even than reading, for there is no way of expressing the dialect in which I think and speak. So kindly forgive the many errors of my brush, for I am trying very hard.

Oh it was such a journey to the palace. We travelled for weeks, I felt as though I had traversed half the world. I did not know you could go so far, except by riding on the sea. How huge the world is! I watched miles and miles and miles of countryside go by, and more towns and villages than I ever knew existed. And while I was mesmerised by all this wonderful enormity, I thought of my new life, training as a dancer; dancing for the palace nobles, perhaps in time for our emperor. But once I got here dancing was never mentioned, and I never saw the grand lady again.

Please do not consider me immodest. I know what I am – I am just a peasant girl with a head full of silly dreams. I would think myself plain, if people were not always remarking on my beauty, and also my quick wittedness. Except for the natural asset of a willowy body, I think my only talent is to learn quickly and eagerly. My mother used to say I was like a boy in that respect. And I suppose fathers everywhere dote on their youngest daughters, and tell them they are beautiful.

My oldest sister, who to me was a picture of loveliness, always said I was destined to outshine them all. The old colonel she married gave my father many animals for her, he thought her so pretty. I still saw her on market days; she seemed very grand, having money to spend, when we only bartered. But now I can never see her again, nor the beloved land of my birth – not just because I have come very far, but because

once you are here, in the royal city, you can never leave. No one ever leaves, that is the tradition.

My sister would always buy a treat for me, and tell me how prettily I was growing. Little dreamer, she called me. Yet she encouraged my dream to be a dancer. And so do my friends here. They say I should ask if I may train, for my beauty would surely outdo my raggedness and win me the honour. On the other hand, except in a fairy story none of them has heard of a maid of any sort progressing to be a dancer. I do not dare ask – even if I knew whom to ask. The housekeeper would likely as not wallop me for the impertinence.

Nor am I unappreciative of the privilege it is to be here – at the hub of the world. Cleaning floors is not unimportant work in a royal palace, where the finest ladies and gentlemen of the world walk about, where every day the concourse of officials and dignitaries, emissaries from distant lands, consuls and satraps and viziers and plenipotentiaries (you will notice how I am picking up mandarin terms and titles, though I do not understand what they all are) arrive and depart and parade and do business. Where everyone comes to do honour and homage to the emperor, the great lord they all call him, high and low alike. For many of lowly station come too, to beg charity, and he is very generous with his wealth.

The ground of our empire is sacred – a country girl knows that better than most – so the floors of our greatest palace are not to be despised. I take pride and great care in my work of cleaning them, back-breaking though it is. I do not sweep dust into cracks like some girls. And I think of the noble feet that have trodden them: the bejewelled slippers, the military boots, the wooden sandals, the little bare feet of the pretty concubines, the chubby toes of baby princes. My life is a tiny part of what makes the vast greatness of this empire; they did me no dishonour to fetch me from Kwangtung to serve my emperor thus.

But I wish there were some other way in which I might serve him. Oh how I wish and dream! In truth there is less difference between us than you think: but for their fine clothes and their pearly earrings and their soft beds and their warm baths and their tasty food and their reading lessons, and their pretty slippers, princesses and concubines and dancers are slaves too, in their way. They too are captives here. They are drilled in obedience and etiquette, they live to serve. I suppose they daydream too. Except I am sure they do not dream of scrubbing floors.

So as I crawl the endless corridors, or eat my porridge, or lie on my plank, I am a beautiful princess. A captive princess a thousand miles from my home. The dancing princess. That is what I am. And I dance for my lord my captor. He appreciates my skill, he dotes upon my beauty, he is very kind to me. I am the heartache of princes, the envy of serving girls, the king of the world's most beloved. The finesse of my poise makes old men smile; the inscrutableness of my face makes

young men sigh. A high and a powerful lady of the court, a virago (I think the word is), I am noble even among nobles. A wave of my hand is enough – the entire court bows, the highest servants tremble; floor cleaners shuffle into corners when I sweep by them.

Four very well-spoken girls bathe me, perfume my body, dress my hair. Two ladies of high degree, countess this and that, prepare my clothes and dress me. A noble dowager looks after my boxes of jewellery, helps me choose what to wear from the priceless beads and brooches my emperor has given me (pearls are my favourite, I tell her); advises me on courtly etiquette and private intimacies, in motherly whispers. Two eunuchs open the door of my chamber. A petty nuncio announces my imminence. Four little daughters of courtiers carry my train behind as I breeze along the palace's sparklingly clean corridors.

A bedraggled menial down on all fours scrubbing hard puts her face to the floor and covers her head as I approach, as they must; but I know she peeps through her fingers in admiration and envy. Being a true princess, kindhearted and magnanimous, and utterly without condescension, I call an order to the chamberlain who has just bowed low to me. That cleaning girl – have her transferred to my personal staff at once, and give her some decent clothes.

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One day I got caught in a corridor that I should have finished, just as a procession of grandees swept through. I crouched inconspicuously in a corner, with my head on the floor; but an attendant came and kicked me nonetheless.

Then I heard a soft and kindly voice restrain him, and ask to see my face. I did not dare lift my head.

Show your face to your emperor when he commands it, the attendant's voice barked. That only made me more terrified.

Do not be afraid to look at me child, said the more kindly voice.

I raised my head, and gazed into the face of the great lord our emperor.

You are the one they speak of, he said, in slight surprise I think; the floor-girl who is so beautiful she puts my finest concubines to shame.

I bowed my head again; I did not dare speak or I would have denied such a thing.

The great lord actually crouched in front of me, and lifted my chin with his own fingers. It is true, what they say about you, he said, I did not believe it but it is true. What is your name?

I still hesitated. The nasty voice snapped: Tell your emperor –. No no, said the emperor, do not chide her. What do they call my famously beautiful floor-girl?

I answered: Liu, my great lord.

That is a lovely name. Liu, you are much too beautiful to be crawling about my floors. Would you like to be one of the girls who serve me?

I do serve you my lord, I said, rather impudently I suppose.

His eyes brimmed with tears, I swear they did, and he said: Sweet child: you will never be dirty or frightened or ache from doing menial work again, I shall not permit it. Would you like to have pretty clothes and jewellery, and bathe in scented water, and sleep between sheets of silk?

Oh yes my lord.

Would you like a place in the household of my precious concubines?

And serve the pretty ladies? I said stupidly.

No no: and serve your emperor.

I hesitated to answer, perhaps I looked disappointed. The nasty voice said: It is any girl's heart's desire – say yes to your great lord's command.

But the emperor, still crouching before me, said: It is an invitation, not a command; is your heart's desire something else?

My ... my dream is to be a dancer, my great lord. But if the need for concubines is greater I will serve your majesty in whatever way I am commanded.

His hearty laugh silenced the admonishment I expected from his nasty attendant. He took my hand, even though it was unclean from work, lifted it to his face and tenderly kissed the back of it, then looked me in the eyes and said: I command you to be a dancer. It is better that a dancer's *beauty put my finest concubines to shame than a floor-girl's.*

But it will not cure me – not now that I have seen you with my own eyes, and know that what they say is true ...

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Another reason I know I am beautiful, and another reason I miss my homeland, is that young as I was I had an admirer. I had a boyfriend.

He picked me out from among all the better-dressed girls. I think he loved me. At least, he told me I was beautiful and gave me some flowers. He picked me out, he waited to give them to me. I skipped home so proudly with my lovely gift. I liked him very much.

If I had not have gone away I feel sure he would have spoken to me again. It all happened so quickly, when the grand lady recruited me for the palace, I had no time to think of him. What with the sadness of leaving my parents and sisters, and the excitement of the great journey, and then the hard work they set me to as soon as I arrived: I had been here some time before the inward loneliness began. The more time has passed – I have been here several years now – the more I think of him.

I wonder if he thinks of me. His father was a potter, and because his older brothers were learning the craft *he* was being educated in book-keeping. For it is a trade in which you can make a fortune, shipping porcelain to the land in the west, where they think it miraculous. They cannot discover the secret of how to manufacture it. And so that their own pots seem more precious, they decorate them with copies of the pictures that my boyfriend's family paint upon theirs. His sisters told me this, they are very skilled paintresses – I met them at the dancing class, they were my friends.

I imagine some of their wares would be brought to the palace, for the finest things made by craftsmen throughout the empire are collected here. My boyfriend might even turn up himself, seeking the approval and patronage of his emperor. I should not be surprised if he were to become one of the wealthiest merchants in all of Kwangtung. But such is his devotion to the dancing girl he complimented once for her beauty, and loved ever after, that he has no eye for other girls at all. Admirers whether of his wealth, his good looks, or his culture – for by now he will have travelled to the west, and come back knowing words of arabic and wearing strange apparel – have hoped in vain for his favour or had their fathers offer him dowries. He rejects them all.

You can take it from me that he is no dreamer. It is not his way to languish (as some do) in mere imaginings. And what man would reject the embrace of others, warm and immediate, to brood upon a memory? No, this dancing girl of his is no daydream: his love for her is a living, practical thing, a purposeful intent. He speaks her name often ... yes, of course, his sisters will have told him my name. For her sake he has made himself a man of fortune; her beauty has carried him around the world. And soon, very soon, it will bring him here.

It is only a matter of time before he enters Kanbalu with his slow caravan of mules and ox-carts, half a mile long, laden with lavish bridewealth, a retinue of brightly-liveried attendants, high canopies and shrill trumpets, resplendent and handsome upon his mighty stallion at the head. Word will have come before of this spectacular embassy of love. The whole palace will buzz with it. The young merchant prince,

with riches exceeding the dowry of an empress, approaching the palace-city in stately progression, a thousand miles at his back, to beg the hand of the emperor's most beautiful dancer.

And his bride awaits, his beautiful dancing girl. For that is what I am ... I *am* a dancer now, *truly* I am. I did eventually ask. A high lady of the court makes a visitation to the lowliest servants – very very seldom – and asks how they are and if they have any complaints. No one ever complains, of course; we dare not. But it was my opportunity to say, begging her pardon for the presumption, that I was recruited from a dancing school (which is true) and had believed that the honour of training as a dancer would be given me, if I was obedient and worked hard.

I expected a sharp smack – but my friends' predictions came true. For the great lady said: Well you are certainly very beautiful, even with a smudge on your nose. Can you dance at all? Oh yes your highness, I said. She held her finger up sternly: You are bold and impertinent to ask it, and unless you dance like an angel you will be back here tomorrow, and I shall be powerless to prevent the housekeeper beating the living daylights out of you for your treachery and impudence. But come with me now and I will try you out. I dropped down and touched my head to the floor in gratitude. Come come, she said, marching off, we have no time for that. And you will have to improve that coarse country accent of yours too, you do not want everyone knowing you are a peasant.

I liked this brisk and bossy lady, and she has been an unfailingly kind patron and promoter of me, in her no-nonsense way. She is a noble of great importance, who helps the empresses run their households, and everyone takes notice of her. She is one of those true nobles, whose haughtiness hides a heart of gold and is utterly without effort or pretence. I shall never be able to repay what she has done for me, but she expects nothing – except that I dance like an angel.

Within twenty-four hours – after giving me a scrub in the bath – she had me dance before three very important palace officials. The mistress of the dancers – who was not impressed by my dancing, nor by my accent, but admitted I was exceptionally beautiful. The royal dancing master (I was amazed to be taken before him, he teaches only the cream of the girls, those who will dance for the emperor) – who could tell that I had had lessons, was surprised that I could read, and kindly said that he would take me as a pupil so long as I would study and practise very hard. Of course I promised I would, and touched my head on the floor to him; I liked him very much.

Finally I was taken to a lady called something like the supervisor of concubines, or perhaps it means examiner of concubines (my mandarin is still not good enough to understand exactly some of the old-fashioned titles they use in the palace). She was little interested in my

dancing, chiefly requiring to see what I looked like with no clothes on, which was a little embarrassing. But she clapped her hands together and simply said Oh how beautiful. And then she turned and said quietly to the great lady: Now why do you not bring me beauty like this more often? Which I was honoured by, except for being uncertain how dancing might place me under the supervisor of concubines.

So that is how it happened. I moved to live with the trainee dancers, and now my work is my heart's delight – formal lessons and exercises in courtly dance and what they call grace of movement. My back and legs ache terribly most of the time – it is as hard as crawling around cleaning floors! Yet it is the very opposite: you stretch your limbs upwards and outwards until you feel you have grown a span taller. You ache and sweat and exert until you think scrubbing would be welcome relaxation. And the aim of it all is to seem as if you were made of paper, graceful and effortless, like a kite.

Already I have been placed among the advanced girls, and although they are older and from wealthy families they are all very nice. They tease me a little for my innocence and my accent, of course, but I do not mind. They are my friends now. Of those who are permitted to train, more than half are not good enough in the end; or in some cases perhaps not beautiful enough. The mistress sets very great store by beauty; the honourable master is utterly unconcerned about it – or I should say, rather, he discerns it in our quality of poise and motion, not in our features. Anyway, I have had no problems on either score.

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The day must come, our dancing master often said, when I can instruct you no longer, and you must flutter and fly by yourselves. You must be perfect.

The day will come, our dancing master used to say, when I can correct you no longer, for your wings will bear you beyond my reach. You must be perfect.

The day is come, our dancing master said one day, when I can protect you no longer, it is your time to soar before the sun. You must be perfect.

You belong to the emperor now. I cannot send back an excuse: we are commanded.

He turned to me and whispered: And you, my pupil my teacher, that I have lived long enough to see perfection ... ah, you bow to me now willow, for you are a sweet girl; but the day is coming when I shall bow to you.

The day came: the day of our début before the emperor. You must be perfect in every detail.

We were all nervous, but we all did our best. We had been well taught. I think we were perfect enough.

Afterwards, after we had been dismissed and were giggling with relief, a chamberlain came to the dressing-room door and whispered to the mistress. She approached me looking shocked.

I have never known it before, she said. He wishes to see an encore by the most beautiful and perfect dancer he has ever seen – so the message says. We are commanded.

I wonder who? I said.

She looked at me with that expression of hers, for she always thinks my innocence a sham.

Beauty has a strange affect on people peasant, she whispered. I know you work hard at your dancing, but that will not be why they think you dance so perfectly.

You mean it is I who am to dance an encore?

We are commanded, she said: I cannot send back an excuse. You belong to the emperor now.

I am honoured to dance for my emperor, I said, and with boldness that surprised even myself I skipped proudly back into the court, made the required bows, and began to repeat my dance.

Strangely the room was quiet and dimly lit this time, and the only person I could see as I danced was the emperor himself.

And imagine my astonishment when, while I danced, he rose from his seat, opened up the billowing robes that clothe him and cast them off behind in a grand gesture, his tall and muscular body striding towards me in complete nakedness, golden and shiny and magnificent.

He plucked me off the ground into an embrace, as you would a child, and carried me through the curtains into the darkness of his private apartment.

I cannot really remember much else, except for how warm and comfortable the darkness was, and how lovely it felt, to be touched by an emperor. And then that irresistible tingling feeling that tremors through your body sometimes.

My beautiful princess, he whispered. Those were the only words he said.

I woke up here, back in my own bed.

❋

Nothing prevents your first performance before the full court, before the emperor himself, from being terrifying – if only because it *is* our emperor, the ruler of the world, a man like a god. No ordinary citizen may stand in his presence, nor even look at him; yet we must dance before his gaze, untrembling. And we must be perfect!

Our big day came. The high commissioner for entertainments announced that the élite of the trainee dancers, selected (so he said) from all corners of the empire, were honoured to be commanded to make their début. The royal dancing master (in olden days he would have been executed if one of us made a single mistake, but I am fairly sure they do not do that now) led us out and we prostrated before our king. When we were bid to stand and the music began I was pleased to see my grand lady patron among the gloriously dressed nobles and courtiers who sat around. She smiled at me, and it helped me relax and dance as if I were dancing for her.

Many small performances and open rehearsals had gradually got us accustomed to public appearances, to being stared at by strangers and gentlemen. This and long hours of practice, and our honourable master's patient tuition, had honed us to the perfection necessary for this most important performance, our graduation. So my patron's smile was all I needed. I danced to make her proud of me. We all did our best.

Afterwards the custom is that the emperor picks a favourite and she is called back to dance on her own, and then he gives her a present. This is a great honour but also dreadfully scary, so although I had dreamed (as I do) of being the favourite that day, I was not entirely disappointed when it was not me. I learned from gossip later that the chosen girl was in fact a god-daughter of the emperor's (for all dancers except myself, I forgot to mention, are high born) and that is why he preferred her.

My patron told me that I was the best of the new crop of dancers. The most beautiful too, she added; and although the emperor is rather slow in these matters, preferring a familiar face, he is bound to notice you eventually. Your highness does too much honour to a plain country girl, I think I replied. She shocked me by grasping my shoulders and saying: You are the most beautiful *lady* (I could not believe it – she used the mandarin word that is reserved for royal and noble ladies) you are the most beautiful lady in the palace, and while it is good to be modest you need to be aware of it, for willow, I do not want you to be harmed. You *are* a *good* girl, are you not? She emphasised 'good' in a

way that every girl understands. Oh yes your highness, I said. Stay that way. For when your emperor notices you, he will not be content just to see you dance. Then she embraced me warmly.

As she left she added her usual remark about my rustic accent. I do take language coaching, for I am keen to improve my understanding of mandarin, and also to know other languages, as ladies of the court generally do – there is a language of the far western land which is extremely strange and beautiful, called french. But although I have learned to understand most of the strict court mandarin now, and always speak politely, of course, I have not taken her advice and studied to lose my accent. In truth, among all these well-bred and poshly spoken girls I am actually proud of my southern peasant way of speaking, and for all the etiquette of modest subordination that we are taught, when people ridicule it I bow my head, but I do not apologise.

The other thing they please to mock me for is the size of my feet. They are not big at all; but poor families where I come from do not bind the feet of baby girls as they do in the palace. Little dainty feet are not expected of farm girls. A dancer's feet of course are part of her trade, and often exposed to view. I have friends who are admired particularly for their small and deeply-arched feet, but it is a mixed blessing. Mine provide me with greater strength and balance; and in so far as I am thought a better dancer, this is one of the reasons for it.

After a few times dancing before the emperor I *was* called back, I was the favourite of the day. But I had not caught the emperor's eye. He had a visitor of great importance, a king from a distant land; but he was not a handsome prince, he was an ugly brown-coloured man with a fat belly. He smiled and slobbered profusely. My grand lady patron told me afterwards that it was he who picked me out. I am greatly beholden to his kind lordship, I said. He hoped you would be and wants you to visit his chamber, she said. My face spoke my answer; but she was teasing me. My sweet willow, she said smiling, and stroked my cheek; I told him you were a professional dancer, not a courtesan, and introduced him to someone more suitable. It will be sufficient for you to write him a little note thanking him for allowing you the honour of dancing for him.

Within the royal dancers I have been rapidly promoted, and am now among the five most highly ranked, though I am still one of the youngest. One reason for this – which I take pride in, because it is not to do with beauty – is that I so love to dance, to me it is a privilege not a job: so I work very hard, and study, and it is *my* achievement. I read dancing manuals, which the old master kindly lends me. I practise more than any, not only sharpening my skills and smoothing my gracefulness but also learning new movements, and sometimes inventing them. This is not entirely approved of, for of course we are meant to be timeless and traditional. But whenever I introduce

something new into a performance it wins me smiles, and sometimes compliments afterwards.

The best compliment is when some connoisseur of the courtly dance goes to our teacher and congratulates *him* for a wise and apt innovation. When this happens he tells me, for he is honourable and has always liked me. On the most recent occasion, however, he replied that he was not responsible for it, the pupil had outshone the teacher, the compliment should be addressed to me. His visitor was astonished. In consequence, no less a person than the emperor's most respected female adviser, herself an elderly royal princess as well as an expert on the art of dance, came in person to the dancers' dormitory. She praised my new style of dance, gave me what they call a gratuity (it is a gift of money, apparently very little to them, but it is a fortune to me), and asked who first taught me – was it the royal dancing master?

I told her with some pride (having said of course how much I had learned from our honoured master, and how kind he is to me) that I was from a poor country family and my parents gave vegetables to a lady in the village to teach me. The princess asked me her name and the name of the village, and said she was pleased to know there were dance teachers in such places, she would send *her* a gratuity too. I said: Your royal highness does me great honour, your gift will be welcome to my old teacher, for everyone there is very poor. Are they indeed? she said in a haughty sort of way, for of course she has no idea what life among ordinary people is like. Perhaps I will build them a school of dancing; if poor girls are as beautiful and talented as you we must encourage them! I notice – she continued before I had chance to thank her for her flattery – I notice seeing you without makeup—

Oh I am terribly sorry your great highness, I said, covering my face and falling to my knees; I meant you no disrespect, I was not forewarned of your gracious visit, please forgive me. No no my dear child, the lady said, and even touched my arm; I was merely going to observe how very beautiful you are, even without your makeup. Since you are also a *nice* girl, would you mind me mentioning you to my cousin? or would that not suit your plans? I had no idea what she meant. Your cousin my lady? I think I said, it sounded impolite. He is fond of beautiful young ladies, and very generous to them if they will be friendly with him. But he has to be so careful. The place is full of women who want to catch is eye, but are not very pretty once the paint is taken off them, and are not always very nice either.

All I could think of saying was: As unworthy as I am of your royal highness's attention, I am sure I am the more so of your kindly relative's. She made a little laugh as though I had come out with a witticism, and then leaned forward and whispered, her hand once more on my arm: When he sends for you do not be nervous, and do not feel you must put on an act; just be *yourself*. He will be a perfect gentleman I promise. As she walked away I almost fainted with the realisation

that dawned on me: she was talking about the lord of this earth, our emperor.

❋

He came to me in the early dawn.

As he lifted away the sheet I was entirely exposed to his gaze, unadorned, no makeup nor jewellery nor clothing. Even my hair was unkempt. He did not mind.

He did not tell me I was beautiful. Not with his voice – his fingers told me, his lips told me, all over my body.

After a while he cupped my head in his elbow and asked me my name.

They call your humble servant peasant dancer my glorious lord, I said.

I know – and worse things – and then they sniff, I have heard them. And you smile sweetly at them as if you did not know they were insulting you.

I did *not know they were insulting me, my lord, I replied with slight surprise. I am proud of my poor country origin.*

But you had a name before? he said, kissing my cheek.

Forgive me my lord: when I was brought to your majesty's abode I was renamed willow—

Now that is more apt, they renamed you well, and if you like it that is what I shall call you.

I do like it, I said, and your lordship's approval silences what your servant was going to say of it.

He fingered my mouth lovingly. I should be amazed to silence you, short of removing your tongue.

My tongue is your excellency's to remove or command.

Then tell me anyway, my beautiful willow.

My beloved lord: because of my dialect they misunderstood my name as willow. But the word in your highness's beautiful land of Kwangtung signifies the sighing of the wind, and my mother called me so from as early as I remember.

Pronounced correctly it means that here too – he kissed my mouth – it is because the soft swishing of the willow gives the wind a voice to sigh with.

Your majesty honours me by teaching me the poetry that is in our language.

And who now calls you by the lovely name of sighing of the wind, sighing of the wind?

All who once knew me as such have forgotten me, I fear.

Then it will be my special name for my beautiful new lover.

As he was saying this he gathered me into true intimacy with him, and began to kiss me many times on the face and hair.

I stretched my arms around him, and said: Each time your great highness deigns to call her so will mean more to your servant than being showered with riches or enthroned in heaven.

I shall call you this in public, he said, so that everyone *will know how I love you.*

And I shall sigh secretly at the honour my lord does me.

I shall call you this in private, so that you *will know how I love you.*

Then I shall sigh openly for my lord to hear the honour he does me.

I shall call you this in the eternal moment that we are one, so that god *will know how I love you.*

And the gentle fronds of the willow, and the soft sighing of the wind, will enfold you, and a tempest arise in you, until god and the wind and the emperor of the world sigh as one in the quiet night—

Oh my beautiful sighing of the wind.

... oh my beloved lord.

❋

Wind and water are one ... in our moment of stillness.

❋

It has happened ...

It is no longer necessary to daydream, to imagine. I take up my brush astonished at what has befallen me.

I have caught my emperor's eye.

I tremble to think what I did, though I seemed to leap into it, as if some hand of fate pushed me.

I have spoken to my emperor.

Legend will hardly need to embellish it. How by dignified bearing, and boldness and grace, and consummate skill in the most difficult of all dances, a peasant girl won a potentate's heart.

I have danced for my emperor. And he has fallen in love with me.

A dancing girl who is a special friend of mine ... she tries really hard but I am afraid she is not very good; the mistress says she would have been thrown out if I was not so supportive of her.

On the day I speak of, my friend fell and turned her ankle during a dance before the emperor. I was not dancing, I was watching from the doorway. Without thinking I rushed into her place in the formation, for the whole pattern of the dance would be spoiled without her.

I was not in the required costume, and I did not prostrate. But we finished the dance correctly, so that the tradition was not dishonoured.

While the mistress was complaining that she would be punished for what I did, the chamberlain came to name the girl who was chosen to dance again. My name was not on the roster, so instead he said: The scrubber who has risen so high she no longer bows.

I went in, prostrated myself, and said: Mighty emperor, renowned for the justness of your mercy and the justness of your wrath, please punish only me for our disrespectful performance today.

I should not have addressed him of course, it is not permitted. I could not see if he looked angry for I was lying flat and covering my face, as you must. The whole room was hushed by my treasonable impudence.

In the midst of the silence a kindly voice – my emperor's own voice – spoke. Your presence of mind made amends for your colleague, I shall not punish her.

Oh thankyou, great lord, I said.

And your dedication does credit to your superiors, I shall not punish them. It remains to teach you *a lesson for your several affronts ... But dance for me first – the more beautifully you dance, the lighter your punishment.*

I danced for my emperor.

My instinct told me to do something flamboyant, showing off my athleticism and my mastery of complex movements. I easily could have – trembling as I was a vigorous dance would have come more naturally.

Then my brain told me to dance the quietest, most gentle dance of all, the dance of stillness – a study in poise and control, absolute simplicity and grace, a banquet of subtleties. A dance few dancers attempt, it is so concentrated and difficult. The dance of stillness is both sacred and erotic. The beauty of your body and face is paramount; and yet it is your soul you are baring.

I danced for my emperor, and for him alone. I looked at him directly throughout my dance – and he watched me intently.

I ended curled at his feet, like a dying bird. After some moments, he and his attendants got up and left without saying a word.

He did not punish me.

I asked my mistress if my dance had displeased him.

She shook her head, and seemed almost tearful. Here in the north, she said, we are not used to seeing such beauty.

She seldom compliments me, but I liked that one.

❋

An old woman came to examine me. She stayed all night, and lay in bed with me. She asked me many questions, commented about my accent, was curious about my boyfriend. She looked at and fingered every part of me, even inside my mouth and my vagina. She smelled my breath and my feet. She was a very grumpy old woman. Yet when in the morning I got sick of it and sulked in protest she kissed me on the shoulder and said: Thankyou, my lady. Thankyou for showing me an imperfection. I have searched and searched and could not find one; but if I return with a perfect report they will not believe me. I have never seen a more beautiful *bride* (she used this mandarin word), and I hope it will make your dreams come true.

One thing she had not looked into was my dreams. But they are not what they were. A menial can do nothing but dream. I have found good

fortune enough and come far. My heart's desire – to be a dancer – has come true. When I came here I dreamed of all manner of things, but I had little idea of what being a princess or an emperor's favourite even meant. A princess is a princess, you cannot be made into one. The same applies to nobility. The countess who was a flower seller became a countess through marrying a succession of elderly noblemen. She is not well liked: the nobles hate her because (to them) she is still just a flower seller, the servants hate her because she is so uppity, she does not know how to be truly noble. We are best in our stations.

I know what she meant now of course, my noble lady patron, the time she asked if I was a *good* girl. I know why one of the officials who had to approve me was the supervisor of concubines. I know why the royal princess came to see me without my makeup. I know why the grumpy old woman was sent. I may be innocent, but I am not a simpleton. Nor am I anyone's bride: if they summon me, I shall not go. I am content to ply my craft and lie alone with my reading. True happiness is not to wish you were happier than you are, I read somewhere.

The gossip is that the lady who has been the emperor's favourite is not sent for any more. She has grown rather chubby – though she is very nice – and also has several children. Her household has recently been reduced. Since the royal princess and then the old woman came to see me my friends pretend to think that I am to be the next favourite. He pines for his peasant dancer even now, they say, and then they giggle. It is the kind of teasing girls do. I brush it aside with a haughty toss of my head – and then giggle too!

I believe he has a thousand concubines, the very idea of him having need of me is ridiculous. It is part of his dignity of course, to have so many. Servant girls assume that all great men are lecherous. *We* see it more realistically: his power means he must, it is not a personal indulgence, it is like owning a herd of cattle. Or perhaps it would be nicer to say, a collection of butterflies. I first saw life in the palace through the blurred understanding of a child. All the glamorous, scented women in their beautiful clothes I watched and envied with little thought of what they really are, or of how they became so. Many noble ladies are former courtesans, many courtesans former dancers. My friends see dancing as a route to fortune, if you are lucky and are noticed.

Courtesans, I should explain, befriend nobles and high officials and visiting dignitaries; they keep them company, and lie in bed with them. But the concubines reserve themselves for the emperor, they are very precious, only their lord and certain ladies of his household may touch them. Many are from distant lands (though none of them have rustic accents) – they are traditionally demanded of nobles and princes in the numerous provinces that are part of this empire, who deem it an honour, part of the binding together of the world, to give daughters or

god-daughters or nieces to their mighty overlord. In a sense they are – as I once imagined myself – hostage princesses.

But sometimes there are others – they may be his own royal cousins and nieces, his god-daughters, or daughters and nieces of courtiers, noble ladies' attendants, or they may be dancers. Many high-born girls come to court with the chief aim of catching the emperor's eye. When you do, and have passed some examination (I think they said), you are invited to visit him in private. It is not an invitation, of course, but it is a great honour. And if he likes you, you join the household of precious concubines.

Concubines take turns to wait upon the great lord's pleasure, keeping him company and helping him rest after the cares of a busy day. Whether it is by massaging him (an art of relaxing someone by caresses) or by playing at chess with him (I believe it is a make-believe battle waged on a little table with models of the people at court); whether it is by bathing him or by playing the lute to him. And afterwards they go to bed with him. Special training is given in these skills. Though they do say that friendliness and beauty (and they pause and look at me in a special way when they say it) are more important than any skill that can be learned.

I continue to work hard cultivating my own special skill. While courtesans are most prized for their cultured conversation, and concubines for their attentiveness, the dancer makes an art of her beauty – the disposition of her body, the presentation of its charms, the grace of its movements, the suppleness of limbs, the delicacy of hands, the fathomless stillness of eyes. I have reached a level where if I wished it I could enjoy more leisure. But I practise daily, I am passionate about it. My friends tease me and say I am obsessed; the mandarin word is dedicated, I say. I am a dancer body and soul.

And mind – for as well as practising I study to understand. I have read every dance manual our honoured master can lend me. So now I read books of etiquette, manuals of ceremony, and (of late) philosophical books about matters of spirit, and the sacredness of things. For choreography (as the art of dance is called in mandarin) embraces such mysteries. In dancing as much as in ceremony you need to be in harmony with the season and the orientation, with the dragon lines and ripples. You orchestrate the wind and the water, like a geomancer. A dancer – a good dancer – must study to gain command of these harmonies, this universal rightness of being we strive for.

It was my childhood dancing teacher taught me reading. Most country girls would never think of it. But I was bright and inquisitive, and I remember her saying it might help my prospects. I thank her from the bottom of my heart, for it has been one of my greatest pleasures – as well as helping my prospects! Once I was a dancer I was allowed to attend lessons and language classes, and also to borrow from the palace

library. That is a rare privilege, my grand lady patron introduced me; she told them I was her niece ... from the country, she added. For although I have mastered the noble mandarin language that is spoken here in Kanbalu, my mind still thinks in my native dialect, and my mouth still speaks in the humble accents of Kwangtung.

The word for movement and the word for gracefulness here are almost identical. As you know, our culture prizes the ability to merge the two. A dancer must epitomise it. The world looks to her to embody its ideal of human beauty and grace. It is not all high seriousness though. Some of our dances tell stories, and make people laugh. Certain facial expressions, postures or hand positions traditionally mean tiger, or tortoise, or this and that bird, or of course that villainous monkey everyone loves to hear tales of.

I love stories too, and legends and poems. Well, I have been trying to read poems – but it is not like ordinary reading, they are less meaningful when written than when the poet recites them. They are very difficult to read. But then, like a dance, if you gaze at them they affect your emotions, in a way that goes beyond words ... I am told the emperor loves poetry very much.

❋

At length he sent for me. I did not know if I must dance or not, so I did not know what to wear.

My best friend, who is not a very good dancer but a brilliant seamstress, helped me very much, for I am the only one who does not have wealthy parents sending her clothes and jewels all the time. She altered a costume of her own that seemed suitable for dancing or dining equally, and then she helped make me up and adorn me with pretty beads and ribbons.

Just be yourself, the royal princess had told me; I said it over and over as I walked the long corridors. They were very clean.

The guards at the several doorways into the emperor's private presence let me through as if I were high and mighty, as if I were the princess of my dreams. A steward opened the final door and closed it behind me.

I immediately prostrated, as is the custom. The great emperor's surprisingly sweet, soft voice said: Rise, welcome. I stood.

He was sitting at a very small table on which chessmen were arranged, the table top being a chess board. He was gazing at the figures, who seemed in the midst of a battle. Do you play chess?

I bowed my head shamefully and said: No my great emperor. He sighed disappointedly, without looking up. Already I had disappointed him.

But I had the presence of mind to add: But I should like to learn. It came out in a tone that sounded too bold.

He looked up immediately. I crossed my wrists before my eyes. You may look at me, he said. So I did.

You are that impish dancing girl, I know you are not afraid to look at me. He looked back down at his chessmen. It takes years to learn how to play, and I hoped for a game now.

I am a quick learner my lord, I said; please teach me.

I teach you! he snapped in disgust. Why do I employ a hundred chess masters?

I bowed my head again, but said: I thought my great lord, who has honoured me with his invitation to visit, might take pleasure *in instructing and beating me – beating me at chess that is.*

He laughed one of those manly, single-yelp laughs. Witty as well as impudent: neither of those things are in the report I have received.

I looked up and said, with deliberate eagerness: I am truly a quick learner, my emperor, please *show me how to play.*

Yes, that is there, he said, looking at a small scroll that he had taken from his sleeve: blaa blaa blaa, dancing genius*, blaa blaa blaa, works hard, studies hard,* learns quickly*, reads and writes, borrows from the library, speaks several languages, unusually intelligent for a* scrubber*.*

I think this word, which sounds out-of-place in mandarin, and is also the word they use to insult me, made me look hurt momentarily.

You did scrub floors, did you not?

I replied: I was proud to help maintain the cleanliness of floors that so great a king's feet had trodden ... though also surprised that your lordship's floors needed cleaning so badly that a grand lady had to come a thousand miles to fetch me to do it.

He laughed again. I was pleased to make him laugh.

Did she indeed? I notice you brought your accent with you – which province were you fetched from, for that noble work?

Your lordship's great and beautiful southern province of Kwangtung, I said proudly.

Ah, full of rich merchants who pay insufficient taxes.

In the countryside, your majesty, everyone is very poor.

He was looking at me intently by now, and smiling.

I apologise if my accent is coarse to your ear, my great lord. Everyone has told me to lose it; but truth to tell I think I have stubbornly not wished to, for the tremendous love I bear to your majesty's southern land, the land of my parentage, which I shall never see again.

Six artists shall be sent to depict it, and their paintings shall drape the walls of your apartment.

I sleep in the dancers' barracks my lord.

No longer, he said firmly, as if making a decree. And do not change the way you speak. The next 'everyone' who criticises your accent, you may tell them you keep it by your emperor's command.

I could not help smiling, as if he had given me a gift (which he had). He was still looking into my face intently.

It is not true, what they say about you; they are mistaken, he said. I looked quizzically. They say you are beautiful.

I felt I had disappointed him once again, and said quietly: I am a despicable nothing in the presence of your magnificence, mighty lord, but I did my best to make myself look pleasing for your majesty.

You please me very much, he said. To say you are beautiful is like saying the finest wine is wet. If you are merely beautiful I have a thousand ugly concubines. The loveliness of the human race, its very humanity, expresses itself in you – in the grace of your movement, in the gentleness of your nature, in the naturalness of your wit, in the utter perfection of your face. I look at you and see the day of creation, the reason the human race exists. You are feminine beauty personified, the first urge against mortality ...

He rose from his seat and stepped towards me.

They call me the great lord, I am the mightiest sovereign in the world. Yet I am trembling as I look into your face, for it is the most perfect and humbling thing I have ever seen. I am a despicable nothing in the presence of your magnificence.

He held his hand out for mine, but instead of raising it to kiss, which is what I expected, he leaned forward and kissed my lips. He then bowed his head, shyly I would have thought, had he been just an ordinary man.

He gestured for me to sit at his chess board.

He patiently explained all the peculiar moves of the chessmen, and the main rules, and then we played a game of chess. When I moved incorrectly he placed his hand upon mine and guided it in the correct movement. When I made silly strategic decisions he offered me a second chance. He won of course.

But I learn quickly, and in the second game he gave me no quarter, and I fought strongly.

When he took my queen he held it in his fist and looked me straight in the eye. I did not drop my gaze. And he said, very softly: I forgot to tell you what we were playing for ...

I replied: Whatever it is, your lordship has won it.

If I said it was your virginity, what would you say?

I would say, my lord – I am glad I brought it with me.

He laughed, and then said: What would you like to have played for?

Our hearts, my lord.

So have I won that too?

No my lord, I have lost it.

I should like to meet the person who gave you lessons in wit.

Your majesty is looking at her.

He was *looking at me – he was looking at me with such affection, not like a king at all.*

If I were just a peasant, he said, a poor farmer here in Kanbalu—

I should not have come.

And you were a princess from Kwangtung ...

Now it was I made a little laugh. Could he read my most secret imaginings? Are emperors so godlike?

I used to dream of being a princess, I muttered shyly.

Tonight, when you dream, it will be so, he decreed; for a mighty prince will lie in your arms, humbled by your beauty.

Tonight, a mighty prince will dream of being a poor farmer, I said; for a peasant girl will lie in his arms, ennobled by his love.

And it was so.

❋

The four empresses represent the four winds. As I, for instance, were I a princess and thus fit to marry him, might represent the south wind. In this way not only in his rule but in his person, in the love of his heart and in the seed of his loins, my beloved lord embraces the world. He consolidates his empire by clasping its four quarters to his bosom. And the sons he has by these four wives become kings of regions in their mothers' lands. While in each empress, each as he truly loves her, he sees the peoples over whom he reigns, and knows them: knows them as a husband, the tenderness of their flesh, their eternal motherline, their fragile mortality. It is thus that he can never cease to be merciful, in all his realms, however firm his rule must be: for he only has to look into the eyes of one wife to be moved with pity for a million people.

They say that, when the north wind blows (for example), my lord will think of his wife from the north, and long for her. The most beloved of the four winds is the south wind, for it is warm and gentle and laden with fragrance. My mother named me for this wind, for my child-name until I came to the palace was Liu, which is to say, the sighing of the wind. In the fields where I played, heedless of the future, the south wind bathed me with spicy freshness, caressing the tips of my hair and the little curves of my body, sculpting my beauty as I grew.

And I think it was the same wind made me want to dance. As far back as I can remember I wanted it, for I saw how the trees bend and pose and sway, and how graceful a kite is in its element of air. The first dances I danced were in imitation of these things. I bobbed and skipped along the levee beneath my brothers' kites, trailing wavy ribbons in the breeze.

Philosophers teach that there are *five* directions, five sectors of the world, the fifth being the sacred centre, the pivot of the quarters. That pivot of course is here: it is Kanbalu. So I suppose there is a fifth wind. It is the calm at the centre – the wind represented by the dance of stillness. The quiet reverence that surrounds our great emperor. The wind that is no more than a sigh in his breath. A sighing in the heart of my beloved lord. I sigh for him as he surrounds me ...

It is a lie, an illusion, catching the emperor's eye. The elderly royal princess his cousin chooses his mistresses for him, after thorough vetting. But my lord says wind and water were in harmony the day she told him of me; he means she chose well, he means it is our destiny. He has truly endowed me with a special place in his affections, and a unique rank at court to reflect it. I am the cause of debate among advisers. New titles and protocols have had to be invented. My detractors call me the emperor's scrubber. My fellow dancers (the nicest of all the palace women), who named me peasant dancer, which I know they meant fondly, address me as princess now, with a giggle of irony. But my official title is consort of the heart, which is a gift he has bestowed upon me – though it took three cabinet meetings for the wise and withered counsellors to approve it.

Then they had to decide who should bow to me. The emperor told them I was the perfect embodiment of female humanity: he was of a mind to decree that *he himself* must bow to me. They were shocked by this, and some said I had bewitched him and caused his mind to go woolly. I asked him not to make an issue of it, for it would make people hate me; and seeing his resolve disappear the old men drew the line very low – hardly any but servants have to bow to me. It is a good ruling. For it invoked one of the greatest tributes ever paid to anyone in the history of this palace. On my next appearance in formal court, where by the new law none but attendants needed to bow, fully half of the noble ladies and gentlemen present bowed low when I entered, knowing they need not.

One of the empresses shuns me and regards me as an upstart. But the others are courteous to me. Certainly they are not jealous, for my lord had a thousand concubines anyway, and he still honours each empress by seeking her society on the traditional days assigned to her. It is the concubines who are jealous. For they wait upon him only to feel themselves reduced to maids by my presence. I am sorry for hurting them. I send them gifts – for I have a household now, with a grant of money to run my own affairs and buy lovely things and bestow largesse. Those gifts that are sent back, I give to servant girls.

The other unique thing about me, of course, is that I continue my dancing. Everyone thinks it shameful, to defy convention thus. The dancing concubine – it is said in a certain tone, and with a shake of the head. But I will not give up my vocation. My beloved lord understands and allows it, by decree. And as they disapprove, so they flock in great numbers whenever it is known I am to dance. I fill halls with the enraptured faces of those who have tut-tutted me in corridors; and the faces of servant girls fill the doorways (for I have ordered that they be allowed to pause from their work and watch). And when the emperor applauds, everyone applauds.

I believe they like me really. Jealousy at court is not personal, it is a form of politics, it is customary to disapprove of the latest favourite,

whether a minister or a mistress. While to distrust someone who has risen from low estate – on the rare occasions it happens – is natural to them. Rank is too often gained by doing others down. I have never harmed nor hated anyone, and now I am of high degree I am careful not to forget who I am. I try to give no-one cause to dislike me. And as for my dance, I maintain scrupulous decorum and keep it a sacred thing, observing all the protocols and traditions that honour the symbolic heart of it.

Of course when we are alone I dance for my lord a more personal dance, with as much grace but a more sensual sacredness. In private I dance for him in a costume that my personal seamstress (my dear friend, whom I have appointed to my household) has made up specially, of a costly fabric so finely wrought and so thin you can see through it. And when my dance is done I let the gown fall at my lord's feet, and he gathers my body in his strong and loving arms and makes me feel as if my beauty were deep within me, even if all else were stripped away. Of all the jewels he has given me, he says, the pearl beyond price is the one that I give to him.

I did not lie, when I said I was a virgin. But I had no qualms in relinquishing it to my gentle lord. I was neither shy nor reluctant, my only desire was to please him. His ample flesh and thick limbs surprised me a little – I had thought his billowing robes disguised a leaner, athletic physique. His love of hunting, his military prowess, and (I might add) his reputed ardour had made me picture him thus – such was my innocence. I did not know mortal men had such fat bellies and bottoms, I thought it was just lord Buddha! Of course an emperor is not like other men. It is only to be expected that he will be as much greater in appetite, for food or for women, as he is in power. And like the lord Buddha my lord is almost a god, so perhaps that is why.

In truth this mighty king is tender, and easily pleased. Being a public man, surrounded by courtiers and servants and visitors, he prizes our times together as much for his solitude – I mean with me – as for the intimacy of the bed. I see now why they teach that conversation is the most important thing for a mistress to cultivate. Helping him relax from the heavy cares of his office as we eat, or make music (I have learned to play the lute, though not very well), or play board games, or read poems, or just talk, gives me untold joy – for I have never had a man to sit beside of an evening in contented companionship, as I recollect my parents doing when I was small. I trust they still do.

But the bodily pleasure is mutual too. He likes to see and hear my pleasure, to know how nice it feels for me. And it truly does. I love to be touched, I delight in being loved. I nestle into his cushions of flesh, I disappear into their warmth and softness. Oh what dreams I dream in his embrace. The servant girl who won an emperor's heart. The fifth empress, the choreographer of stillness. The daughter sold into slavery, bringing home as vagabond her master, her husband.

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And so, our beautiful season of passion. All the trees blushed to witness it, and shook off their leaves. Leaves danced in the wind like a thousand kites; leaves cushioned our feet in the palace garden.

It started with the last berries of summer, and ended with the first snow flurries of winter. From sweet purple to sharp white, our hearts and our bodies banqueted upon the world's most gorgeous colours and tastes and textures and smells.

The white sheet muffled our murmers each night; the purple palace echoed our laughter each day.

Like babies we splashed in water together. Like children we rolled and tickled on grassy slopes. Like grown-ups we ravished each other among cushions – and also on grassy slopes, and also in water.

I rode the upside-down stallion so often I was dizzy and sore. A season of ecstasy. A daily gorging upon deliciousness.

My lord was ninety warriors coming home from the battlefield ravenous with triumph; and I was ninety times the neatly-laid table, with mounds of his favourite fruits and meat, juicy in wait for him to lay me waste.

My lord was ninety travellers making thirsty pilgrimage to the sacred spring; and I was ninety times the brimming well, in which all unholy desire is quenched, and life has its source.

My lord was ninety gardeners patiently cultivating and fertilising the earth's robe of beauty; and I was ninety times the deep pink flower, opening tremulous and tender to his touch ...

But travellers leave as well as arriving. Other duties are called to mind: sooner or later gardeners and warriors will look past your shoulder.

Winter will not hold back for love, not even for the love of an emperor.

Seasons change, birds migrate, ideograms across the sky. Trees realise they are naked and shiver.

My winter's work was to keep my love for him. To be there when next he needed me, in due season. The next time he heard the south wind sigh through a willow tree and yearned for his dancing peasant girl.

My job was not to mind. Even as my love for him reached at emptiness in the long night. Even as the winter chilled me to numbness. Even as the spring unfroze the wells of my eyes.

If I loved a soldier he would go off and leave me too. If I loved a merchant, shipping porcelain to the west, I would spend long hours and months missing him, and imagining him and remembering him.

Remembering his gentle kiss – and his rough kiss. Imagining the stillness of his back – and the motion of his back.

Sculpting him lying in the darkness next to me, his whole magnificent body, replicated in thought. Concentrating imagination's vividness until – yes, he is there, that was the sound of him moving, everso slightly.

The sheet rises as he turns to me, and I turn too. A hand that touches my breast and rests on my hip – is too small, it is my own hand.

I hold my breath and listen for him. There is a slight sighing of the wind in the far distance ...

❋

My apartment is richly furnished and full of precious, pretty things. A wardrobe of the most beautiful and expensive clothes and shoes; a set of chessmen with such funny faces, carved from walruss's teeth (I think they said), a gift from my beloved lord to remind me how I won his heart at a chess board; a shelf of the finest painted porcelain which the merchant assured me was made by the very family I described; a pretty paper lantern my friends made for me when I left the dancers' dormitory. It is worthless, but I think I value it the most.

And the walls of my apartment are painted with landscapes of Kwangtung, a panorama, from the farmlands of my birth to the great estuary. Each of the six artists, upon completing his picture, then had to make a portrait of me for the emperor, each in different costume. I liked best the portrait in peasant garb. It captured the simple country girl that used to daydream within me, and is constantly surprised to have come so far. The emperor did not like it at first and was for punishing the painter for making me look scruffy, until I said I thought this artist deeply perceptive, for he has seen into my soul. I had hoped they would return with news of my family, and my boyfriend. But Kwangtung is a large region.

Yet it was not long after, that I received a letter from my old dance teacher. It opens with the mandarin salutation most high and honourable lady. She is the principal now of a little dancing academy, founded by a grant from the royal chest. I had quite forgotten about it. It has paid for a school to be built, with courtyards and dormitories and

gymnasium and dance theatre; and as well as girls whose parents pay fees, it is a condition that a number of poor girls from the country parts of Kwangtung are taught for free. My old teacher says this is all down to me, thanks me, and mentions how helpful some further endowment would be to the academy's future. Several pupils have been launched upon promising careers. But your most noble highness is your servant's greatest protégé, she says.

I think she has forgotten she sold me to clean floors ... It is as well she has, and mean of me to think of it. I have sent her a large gratuity from my own allowance, admonishing her to apply it to the free teaching of poor girls. My heart would leap with pride to have helped her were it not for the sorrow and homesickness that her letter has made me feel. For she ends with a postscript, as if assuming I know: I was sorry to hear of the passing of your highness's parents during the harsh winter that followed the great crop failure.

It is the only letter I have ever received. She does not realise how cut off we are from the outside world. We hear of crop failures, of course, they are a concern to my lord and his minister of finance; but I have overheard the words without attaching human significance to them. That is how much a country girl I am. I am very ashamed.

She does not say – my old teacher – how she came to know of my career, of my elevation. But of course they hear more news of us than we do of them. Word has a way of spreading, if not overland then through the great trading ports, bustling with talkative merchants and inquisitive diplomats who have either been here or are on their way. They are bound to speak of the dancing concubine, consort of the heart, risen from cleaning floors to be the most famous dancer in the world, and the king of the world's most beloved.

Doubtless the legend will grow among the people of Kwangtung, of the willowy peasant girl sold as a menial, whose native gumption and loveliness (and hard work, I hope they remember to mention) lifted her out of drudgery to unprecedented rank and fame. Her southern grace and beauty so rare, among the uglier if nobler people of the north, that it stunned the halls of Kanbalu. Eventually, even the emperor could not resist loving her. Six of his finest painters it took to capture her beauty. A thousand concubines from all corners of the empire, each a paragon, sit around neglected, she so outshines them. The greatest expert on womanly beauty and character, after prolonged examination, found only one fault in her ...

Gossip and legend *will* exaggerate, I cannot stop them. The emperor is said to have named me his priceless pearl (he did say something of the kind): so in Kwangtung that will be what they call me. They say I grew up in a hovel on the riverbank and bathed daily in the magical water. To this they attribute the pearly lustre of my skin, the beautiful curves and softnesses of my body, the grace and subtlety of my limbs as they

dance. No wonder my famous dance of stillness looks as if it were performed under water, for that was my natural element as a child. Oh how wind and water were in harmony then (they recall, with a dreamy expression). Which is why the great river has lost its soul to commerce – it is all since its priceless pearl was taken from it.

What nonsense, I shall say, with a dismissive flourish of my fan, if anyone returns from travelling and mentions it. How gullible people are! And yet, is it inconceivable that news of me would touch someone's heart, or stir pride on my native soil? Where would be the harm of it? Even that they should long to get me back? Why would they let me languish any longer in the drudgery of scrubbing or dancing or copulating? A clamour spreads across the countryside: the princess from Kwangtung should be returned to her homeland.

I do hear rumours from time to time, I cannot tell if they are all to do with me: ransoms being raised, ultimatums arriving, expeditions preparing to come here with force. That would be a terrible war, I do not want that to happen. But delegations of dignitaries or merchants often ask to see me dance. The mistress comes in saying: They are asking for that priceless pearl again, the concubine that dances; I think they mean our scrubber. What I am always hoping, of course, is that it will turn out to be my boyfriend, whether on his own account or leading an embassy from the people of Kwangtung. One day I was actually told it was a merchant from the pearl river. My excitement built as we entered the court. But a greasy fellow dressed in furs sat there, looking like a horsethief.

Or perhaps they will attempt to steal me in the night and smuggle me out among their caravan, hidden under merchandise. Now I have an apartment of my own I leave the window loose, just in case. Some careful act of infiltration, a quiet rescue, unnoticed until we are half-way home, is what would work best. It is dangerous because the palace is so large and so well guarded. It needs to be carefully planned and calmly executed, like an impossibly difficult-seeming dance.

But the nicer thing to dream of is the ransom they would assemble – the greatest bridewealth ever seen. Coin weighs light on an emperor's scales: it will need to be exquisite presents and rarities, so many they may have to bring them by sea. A ship laden with unparalleled treasure: porcelain, silk, tea, spices, jasper, amber, amethyst, turquoise, ivory, silver, and pearls, baskets of pearls. I think of the flotilla making its way among the mermaids, slowly, majestically northwards. Three ships low in the water. Riders coming in from the coast to tell of them; the emperor watching from a turret, amazed.

Coral trees and conch shells, tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl; filigree and embroidery, lacquer and lace; tiger skins, swan's eggs, sea horses; jasmine and camomile and camellia plants, rose-water and tender ointments. And I almost forgot to say pearls, pearls are my favourite

jewels of all. My handsome boyfriend windblown on the forecastle, remembering the day he won my heart with a posy, commanding the water to heave aside for his heavy fleet. All this treasure, all this beauty, to weigh on the scales against a peasant girl.

❋

I see so little of my lovely man, my husband, my emperor, my beloved lord. He actually only resides here for six months of the year.

And then, quite apart from the endless round of courts and receptions and banquets and cabinets, which sometimes go on well into the evening, he has his four wives, living here in four separate households, and his so-called thousand concubines, who wait upon him daily by rota, six at a time.

Not to mention dozens of sons and daughters, from grown-up to newborn, and daughters-in-law.

There are never fewer than hundreds of royal princesses, noble ladies, and high-bred courtesans in attendance at court. Never mind the ambassadors and ministers and generals and advisers and astrologers and officials and poets and lute players. Every one of whom has several nieces!

And then there are the beautiful dancing girls, the nicest of all the palace women. I count their friendship among my highest privileges. Peasant dancer they called me, with affectionate giggles. I shall never forget them. It is not true, that they used to sniff behind my back, I do not believe it.

This year I did not see my lord at all until the New Year festival, and then it was because I was dancing. He was engrossed in conversation with some military men and hardly seemed to notice me.

I waited some months before receiving an invitation to spend an evening with him. Last year we had three nights together; this year's was not even a full night.

He was not there when I arrived, I waited for several hours. When he came he was apologetic, and kissed me tenderly, as he does.

He had eaten already. He did not want to play chess. He was sick of music following him around everywhere, he said.

He did not want an aromatic massage, he had masseur-concubines to do that. I did not say I had learned it from one of them specially, to please him.

Why was I wearing this heavy gown? I took it off. It is very cold today, but I have beneath it my thin costume in hopes of pleasing your lordship—

Have you nothing new? Your wardrobe expenses would clothe an army.

I burst into tears. I thought it a special expression of our unique love.

He embraced me kindly, and said: Come now my beautiful princess, forgive an old emperor with the troubles of the world on his shoulders.

I said: I have dishonoured your majesty by weeping when I should be making you happy. My excuse is that it has been a whole year of loneliness for me since we were last together, and I have looked forward so much to being with my beloved lord, to being loved and special again.

You have kept your accent, my southern beauty; but your smile has deserted you. It is my fault for keeping you in solitude. I will release you from concubinage and you can seek happiness with another.

Do you mean I may go home, my lord? I said naively.

Your home is here willow, you cannot leave it. But a courtesan beloved of her emperor and unrivalled in beauty will have no difficulty finding a generous protector, perhaps even a handsome one.

I am not *a courtesan, I said tetchily, I am a professional dancer. He should have rebuked me, you do not speak thus to an emperor. But he stroked my head forgivingly and said nothing.*

After adjusting my smeared face I asked him whether he wished me to stay or leave, and was pleased when he said stay. We went to bed.

We made love briefly, he was quickly satisfied. He stroked me for a little while, then he fell asleep.

I nestled into his warm flesh. There was more of it than ever this year, but I truly loved the feel of it, against my body and under my hands. I thrilled with happiness to be cushioned amongst it, it was my most special and lovely place to be. I lay awake to prolong it. Dreaming my beloved lord loves me, dreaming that beauty does not matter.

Soon after dawn he rose, unusually early, and was gone by the time I got up.

❋

The decree that I am no longer a precious concubine but retain the rank and privileges of an honoured noble lady, his loyal and much beloved cousin and guest (for it would disgrace me if it were to seem he had rejected me), was published about the time my lord left the palace for his spring itinerary. My household has been reduced.

My dancing career will not revive, for although I have stubbornly defied convention by remaining a dancer, my segregation from the ordinary dancing girls is irreversible. I must seem a grand and remote personage to them now. Anyway, like all performers, I cannot defy the inexorableness of time. It is a dream for youth. Perhaps they would like me to do some coaching: I should be happy to do that, if they were to ask. But my friend and mentor the old dancing master has died, full of years and honour. The whole court mourned him, and I danced for his memory. I have not performed since. The last time I saw him his bones hurt too much to bow, though he began to try. I embraced him and said: There is no need to bow to me, honoured father, I am just a peasant girl. I bow to you in my heart, he said. I wish I had said it to him.

In a sense my lord was right, on our last evening. I am a kind of courtesan, whether I take other lovers or not, that is the category I fall into now. A sad courtesan, beloved and friendless. A weeping willow, I have heard that some call me. My title, consort of the heart, I may no longer use: the deputy commissioner of protocol, with an apologetic bow, says my lord may wish to bestow it upon someone else. Certain gifts, like love, cannot be kept.

I pace about my cell, as if waiting to be ransomed. I walk outdoors, but high-ranking ladies alone are always much stared at. I end up wandering the palace corridors, trying to look as if I am busily on my way somewhere. The corridors are extremely clean. I see my old housekeeper now and then but she scuttles away when she spots me. I should like to compliment her on the consistent standard of cleanliness her menials maintain, I really would speak to her nicely, if she would tarry. Why would I scold her? Alone of all the palace I know what arduous work her girls do. I should like her to see that I am much the same as the ragged child she used to smack, I have not become uppity, I have not lost my accent. But she scuttles away.

There is a particular girl who catches my eye, partly because she always seems to be scrubbing so hard (as you do when a grand lady comes strutting by, I suppose), and partly because she is dark skinned. She is also very skinny. I spied an opportunity eventually, and knelt down and spoke to her. She was terrified, poor mite, and her terror not easily allayed as she did not understand what I said. I had to lift her chin with my fingers and kiss her cheek to convince her that I wanted to be friendly. I tried several languages, but none were her native tongue. I think she said she was from a land called Bangla.

I came upon her again a week later. I had been to the library. Bangla has a language of its own which is difficult to find out about, but some there use the western trading languages. I managed to make her understand me a little. She and a few other children were rescued by merchants after great floods destroyed their village. I think she said the whole world was flooded. She assumes her parents are drowned. I tried to ask her what she wanted to be, what her daydream was, but she did not understand. They have named her nigger, a merchant's word for dark-skinned slaves. I think she said her real name was kumara, which (I know you will not believe me, but I am certain of it) means princess. Oh yes, she would love to be my personal servant and pupil – see how strong she is, she would work very hard for me. She did not understand why I wept.

I could not find anyone to speak to about her. But on another day when I had stopped to say hello to her, a chamberlain happened to walk by. I adopted a somewhat authoritative posture – he bowed slightly – but of course I never could bark commands like a true noble. I said: May I please ask a favour? Might you arrange for this girl to be transferred to my personal staff? He said rather snootily that a menial could be procured through the steward of my own household, there was nothing he could do about it.

I sent an errand boy to the housekeeper, with a message asking if the skinny Bangla girl could be transferred to my personal staff, as I needed a maid. The boy brought a reply straight back: Certainly not. I have walked many miles of corridor since and found no sign of the girl. Obviously she has been spitefully moved somewhere else. Poor friendless thing. I just wanted to be kind to someone whose lonely misery I remember only too well ...

I dreamed of my last night with my lord. And I dreamed that we had conceived a child on that night. It has made me wonder – I cannot drive the thought from my mind. What if I am carrying the child of the great lord our emperor? It would be an apt irony. I may not be a princess myself, but I will be the honoured mother of a handsome prince, or a beautiful princess. My body will begin to change shape: I have never had an ounce of fat on me before. Thinking of it reminds me how I loved being in the arms of that gentle man. At least my child is conceived in true love, unlike so many in this cold place. I was wandering the corridors in a daydream about it when I bumped (literally) into my old housekeeper. She could not escape.

She bowed very low. I touched her arm. You keep everywhere so beautifully clean, I said; I congratulate you, I know what hard work your girls do. Your high and noble highness is most gracious to say so, she stammered, and bowed again. We are old friends, I said, please be informal with me. I fear your grace is kinder to me than I ever was to your grace, she said nervously, and bowed again. Ten years is time enough for bruises to heal, I said, in the wisest tone I could manage. I

have been looking for my friend, the little Bangla girl ... She was transferred your highness – she was a nuisance, not understanding what was said. Where to? I asked nicely. She looked ashamed and I asked it again more firmly. I had no choice your ladyship, she did not understand anything; she had to go where she was more suited.

You could have transferred her to me – please reconsider. If not as old friends then as old adversaries. It is little enough to ask: as you say, she is not much use to you. I should like to help her and teach her, as you may guess. But I *shall* need a personal maid, now that I am carrying my beloved lord's child. She looked chastened for a moment. But then someone else came along the corridor and began speaking to her, and we could not continue.

I thought I had wasted my time. But an hour ago there was a tapping at my outer door. My astonished eunuch sniffily ushered in the ragged waif he had found on the doorstep: her hair and her clothes covered in latrine dirt, her huge beautiful eyes terrified by this unknown errand she had been sent upon. She looked happy when she saw it was me; she prostrated fully, as you would to an empress. Sweet child, I said, kneeling by her: you will never be dirty or frightened or ache from doing menial work again, I shall not permit it. I have put her in a warm bath of scented water. Her body is very graceful and willowy, she will make a fine dancer (if that is what she wants to be). A beautiful dancing princess. I am not sure if princess is her actual name: perhaps it is just what her doting father called her as she scampered free among the pearly rivulets and green fields of her native land.

Or perhaps my beautiful slave, my niece from the country (I think I shall call her), really is a princess of that land, a true princess of the Bangla people. A living trophy. Another captive beauty in the halls of Kanbalu. A vassal prince's daughter. That is what she is – a hostage, an exile. A beautiful princess far from her home. That is what she is, a beautiful princess.

She is a beautiful princess.

* ❋ *

Note

The beautiful guiding muse of this story, her framed picture by me throughout, was the young Amy Yip (Yip Chi-Mei) in her mysterious early career as a Chinese dancer (before she lied about her age and became a famous Hong Kong film star). Kwangtung is an alternative transcription of the name Canton/Guangdong; Kanbalu is an old name for Peking/Beijing. I have tried to make the details of life and conditions, customs and protocols at the court of the great emperor as historically accurate as possible – hence things such as the thousand

concubines, the four empresses, the five ‘quarters’ of which the fifth is the centre, the complexities of meaning in traditional Chinese dance, nobody being allowed to leave the palace-city, etc are not fictitious.

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