

First Journey

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It was my third winter.

Mother was at her early twenties.

It was our first train journey to a city where we had never been to before.

The road was very rugged and I felt dizzy instantly. Mother was herself not so used to train journey either.

In my three-year-old mind's eye, I tried to imagine what kind of a place the city we were heading to might be. Mother had told me that we were going to the place where Father had been working. However, the language there was very different from that we were speaking. And of course, the people there were different, too.

Anyway, it would be an alien city.

I wondered how could I communicate with those people. I was a talkative little girl (well, nanny used to scold me with her spear like glances whenever I told our guests how funny looking were the flowers and fruits in our front and back gardens. Of course, I was overjoyed that nanny was not going to the alien city with us). Somehow, I became more and more worried at what I should do if I could not understand what people were talking in that alien city.

Since I was a physically weak child by nature, as the train moved on, the motion became more and more disturbing to the tiny pool of equilibrium of both my mind and my body. My head was light as a feather. I was not able to land on any specific thought. Suddenly, the idea of dying flashed on me.

“Mammy, am I going to die?”

I might not have exactly understood my own

words, but they must have sounded too ominous to Mother. She lost her usual lustre and good humour. She squeezed a faint smile and pressed my cheek close to hers, and said, “Little girls should not talk of such things. You will live a long life. Nobody is going to die. You are going to perform ‘the Woman Warrior of the Yang Family’ when you become a big girl, right?”

Mother's voice was very soft and sounded like chanting.

From time to time, I mumbled that I might die soon.

Without any knowledge of what death really was, I could not refrain from the thought that this was a journey to the land of the dead.

I pressed my head against Mother's chest and tried to imagine and, at times, dream of what the language in the alien city might be like. At the same time, I also worked hard to conjure up the picture of death in my childish mind.

Mother was a Swatowese opera lover. When she was pregnant, Grandmother would not allow her to go to crowded places. The theatre, of course, was one of the forbidden lands.

When I was four months old, one of Mother's cousins persuaded her to go to see the opera—‘the Woman Warrior of the Yang Family’, which had been a great hit for quite sometime. Mother was not able to resist the temptation because she had not stepped into the theatre for more than one year already. She chose the day when Grandmother and nanny had to go to the temple to offer their worship to the Chinese Goddess of Fertility.

Mother brought me to the theatre. Her worry

was the drums and gongs of the opera might irritate me. Although I was only four-months-old, I was very sensitive to noises and heat.

To Mother's surprise, I was totally fascinated by the glitters and glamour of the stage. My childish eyes followed every movement and gesture of the gorgeous women warriors and the graceful beauties. I was so absorbed and quiet that Mother could not help looking at me from time to time to check whether I had fallen asleep or was enjoying the show.

Mother was relieved that I watched the opera in such a well-behaved manner. We were both perfectly satisfied and happy. Mother knew that from now on she would have a little comrade to go to the theatre with. My love for Swatowese opera seemed to be genetic.

It was through the opera that I learnt the idea of death. In the opera, only the wicked and the adults died at the end. Good people and children did not die. When I thought of that, I had a vague sense of satisfaction that since I was neither a wicked person nor an adult, most probably I would not die.

Death on the stage was the only kind of death I knew.

The train was moving clumsily in the dark.

I thought of the birds, insects and small animals, which made a lot of noises in our back garden. I always wanted to talk to them but they just flew away or ran away the moment I tiptoed close to them. Would people in the alien city talk like birds, insects and small animals in our back garden? Would they run away from me when I talked to them?

Perhaps they talked or shouted like the old peddler who walked past our house every early afternoon with a hollowed-out piece of bamboo

stick on his shoulders. On both ends of the bamboo stick hung a huge rattan basket swinging heavily. I always thought the old peddler looked more like an eight-legged spider than a man. He shouted and screamed the names of his merchandise mechanically and monotonously. Mother said he was speaking a language called Cantonese. And the people in the city we were heading towards also spoke Cantonese.

As the train was meandering through the pitch-dark night, I was half asleep and half awake. Because it was my first train journey, I was rather train-sick and was not able to eat much. Mother had never seen me so quiet. Although she worried about me, she did feel relieved when I fell asleep in her arms.

My mentioning of death must have made her feel helplessly uneasy. As a young mother travelling alone with a three-year-old child to an unknown city, how frightened she must have felt. She must have thought of death herself. My innocent mentioning of death must have disturbed her tranquillity.

Even after so many years, I still remember what might most probably be my first experience of the fear of death. That was the time when I was about two-years-old and was brought to a camera shop to have my first photograph taken. I was put to stand up on the top of a desk.

The desk was awfully tall. I felt very terrified. I thought I might fall down. If I fell, I might die.

I was so scared alone up there on the top of the desk. I wanted to jump down.

Fortunately, there was a tall plant beside the desk. I got hold of one of the branches like someone clutching at a life saving ring.

Flash.

Photo taken.

“Thank you! Little Lady. You’re a genius in posturing.” The man who took my photo said.

However, I thought he was scolding me for clutching at the tree branch. I wanted to cry.

The photo is still in our family album. Every time I look at it, I cannot help feeling that the face is a death mask. I still wonder why a child’s face could have such a petrified expression. Is death or indeed only the thought of death so frightening? Can the thought of death impress such a death mask on an innocent child’s face?

It seemed that ever since I was a little child, I have the tendency to associate unknown things and unknown lands with death.

As the train continued to move forward, our three-storey house with its front and back gardens built by Grandfather, and the Sun Yat Sen Park (named after the birthplace of Dr. Sun Yat Sen, the father of Modern China) where we used to go to see Swatowese opera were left behind. I never returned to them. Fortunately, I still remember and speak the Swatowese dialect. But I miss the Swatowese opera.

After the train arrived at Canton, we boarded a ship (most probably a big boat) to go to Macao. Mother and I were terribly seasick. I was too seasick to think of death anymore.

We stayed in Macao for one day waiting for a ship to go to Hong Kong. While boarding the ship, one of my shoes dropped into the sea.

“Throw the other shoe into the water as well.”

A middle age woman walking behind us was shouting. Mother seemed too exhausted to understand instantly. The woman became impatient,

“One shoe will feel lonely and need companion. Two shoes will make a good couple and settle down. Throw the other shoe into the water as well.”

She continued to shout at Mother. Mother was able to understand this time. However, the woman had already snatched the other shoe off my foot and thrown it into the water.

“The pair of shoes is the substitute of your baby. The shoes dropped into the water as your baby’s surrogate. It has died in place of your baby. Your baby will live a long life.”

The woman’s swift movement shocked Mother very much. The only sound that leaked out of Mother’s mouth was a meek mumbling imitation of “thank you”.

Throughout the rest of our sea journey, the woman was always around and helpful.

When the ship arrived at Hong Kong, Mother wanted to ask the woman’s contact address. Yet she was nowhere to be found.