

### And All Will Be Well

The old men say she is often seen at half-light; sometimes at dawn, more often dusk. Occasionally she appears when there's a mist, or when low clouds descend and Taipa and Coloane are obscured. When light is shaded, when Macau is in a transitory condition balanced between existence and non-existence, that is when it is possible to see a young woman in a red dress looking out to sea. Some people are doubtful and ask why it is that she is never seen in broad daylight, why it is that she seems to be seen more often when sailors have been enjoying the camaraderie of a bar. The fishermen and seafarers dismiss such talk as the idle nonsense of landfolk who know nothing of her ways. They know that she is always with them, and when she is with them all is well.

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The men are tired. They have barely finished sluicing down the deck after their last sailing and the smell of fish hangs around them. They've had a good catch – a large enough haul of snapper and coral trout that as far as everyone except the skipper is concerned means there's no need to go out again for a few days. What they want is time at home with their wives and families, or at least time in the bars and backstreet gambling dens playing dice and losing what hasn't already been spent on beer and women. But the skipper is having none of that.

'No slacking, come on guys. One more big one, that's what we want, just one more and then we can take a break.'

They hate him for saying it, but it's true. The fish are there in numbers. It's obvious. Last time out no sooner had they dropped the net when they felt the weight of the catch. It was a struggle to haul it in.

'Come on, the fish won't wait for us,' he continues. 'Let's get this finished then a few hours kip and we'll go again.'

There are four of them in total: the skipper, two of his cousins, and Ling-wah, the youngest at nineteen. The skipper of the somewhat ramshackled fishing junk is a man in his forties even if he

looks older than that, his youth surrendered to the wind, sun and rain. He is Tanka born and bred. He no longer keeps chickens on board the way his parents and grandparents did, but the hen coops are still there and sometimes he looks at them longingly. His wife used to look after the birds and normally she would still be one of the crew, but she is eight months gone with their second child and although she hates being away from the water she is land-bound these days. Ling-wah has been with them for the last two years. He is the only one of the four who isn't Tanka, which means he is often the butt of jokes based on his lack of sea-faring experience. Yet he has always been drawn to the sea, known since he was a small boy that the sea was where he belonged, though getting on board had been a battle of wills on all sides. His parents had objected from the start, they'd even managed to get him a job as a kitchen boy at the Santa Casa di Misericordia, which hadn't worked out, but eventually they gave in. The skipper and his crew were equally unenthusiastic – they'd never sailed before with someone who wasn't Tanka – but the skipper's wife had had the final word. *'There's something about him,'* she told her husband. *'I think he'll bring us luck.'*

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He was six the first time he saw her. He'd been playing at the water's edge looking for treasures washed up from passing tramp steamers on the way to Guangzhou and the ports upriver. The sun was starting to go down and it was time for home; his mother would be cross if he was late again. The woman was standing barefoot on a rock that jutted out from the sea-wall and he was puzzled as to how she had got there. The wall was high at that point and the rock she was standing on a distance below, but it was the dress that caught his eye as much as anything – a vivid red that shone as the daylight began to ebb away. A colour of celebration and special occasions, the red of weddings and *lai see* packets, and she stood out in a city recovering from the hardships of war. Two days later he was at the same spot but she was not to be seen, and with the quicksilver consciousness of a child his attention was soon devoted to the ephemera of the shoreline and she disappeared from his thoughts.

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A decision is made.

‘We’re going to the Nine Islands,’ the skipper says. ‘They say the *shek baan yu* are there in numbers. You can hear them from Black Sand beach croaking and grunting the way they do.’

‘You’re kidding, right?’ Cousin No.1, a skinny man with muscles like tightly coiled fishing lines, but also with a slight limp from favouring his left leg. The consequence of an accident some years back.

‘What’s wrong with going back to Taipa?’ This is Cousin No.2, the inverse of Cousin No.1, a large man with a high-maintenance stomach.

The skipper is insistent. ‘Everybody’s at Taipa these days.’

‘Yeah well, there’s a reason for that,’ says Cousin No.2 who isn’t giving up without a fight.

Kau Chau. The Nine Islands. Chinese islands in Chinese waters. They’ve long been favoured fishing grounds and nobody has worried about who owned them. But things are different now. There are patrol boats with loudhailers and Party slogans, and – more to the point – guns and Red Guards happy to use them. The Portuguese police aren’t much better: tense, always on the lookout for refugees, and just as trigger happy as their Red counterparts. Five bodies were found the week before, washed up in the coastal mangrove swamps. Nobody asks Ling-wah’s opinion, not that it would make a difference. If the skipper says they are going to the Nine Islands, then that’s where they’re going.

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A few weeks later the boy saw the woman again. This time she was standing on a disused finger pier up at Fai Chi Kei in the Inner Harbour. The wooden struts that supported the pier were rotting away and several of the planks that made up the walkway were missing, and those that remained looked as if a foot might go through them easily. He could see that one of them was about to give way and even at his age it looked a dangerous place to stand.

‘Hello?!’ he called out. No response. He tried again, but if she’d heard him then she was paying no attention. A padlocked gate stopped him from getting closer, but he was sure that he had

to do something, even if he didn't know what, so he ran home, sprinting down dark moss-covered alleys and *travessas*, to the house that his family shared with two others. His mother was preparing food.

'*Mah-ma* – there's a strange woman out on that old pier by the docks. She might fall in, come and see.' His mother told him to be quiet, to help set the table. 'But *Mah-ma*!'

'Quiet now!' The firm reply.

Later, after supper, the boy crept out of the house and returned to the pier. It was dark but there was enough streetlight to see that there was no sign of her. She must be dead. The only conclusion. Washed out into the sea. There was no other explanation for why she was not there when he went back. He did not consider the simple possibility that she had left her precarious position. He assumed the worst. She had been in danger, anyone could see that, and when he had returned she was no longer there, and the splintered planks that had fallen into the waters had not been there before, he was sure of that. There was only one explanation, the logic incontestable, and yet for all that he was not particularly surprised when he saw her several weeks later, this time standing at the prow of a *lorcha* as it moved out of the harbour into the fairway heading for open waters.

She must live on that boat he said to himself, though even at his young age he recognized that he had never seen a boatwoman wearing such fine clothes, with skin smooth, unblemished by wind, sun and spray, her hair fine and black, hanging in a perfect vertical.

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They leave the harbour at dusk as part of an ill-matched flotilla; some older and still under sail, while others, like theirs, fill the evening air with diesel fumes and the noise of progress. Cousin No.1 takes the helm as the fleet moves towards the open waters, while Ling-wah, as he always does at this time of day, looks towards the shoreline and the jetties, thinking back and wondering. Sometimes doubting his memory, but always longing. It's been over ten years now but not a day goes by that he doesn't remember. The skipper and Cousin No.2 keep watch and look in particular towards the

Chinese shore; they do this every time they sail these days, mostly it is dark and quiet, but on occasions they see Red Guards and Chinese patrol boats searching for people trying to swim across the narrow waters.

A few vessels follow them when they diverge from the main route to the fishing grounds off Taipa, but one by one the others go their own way as they sail north, and by the time they are off Areia Preta they are on their own. It is a calm night, an unremarkable October evening with the heat of the day just passed, dissipated by a gentle breeze off the Pearl River. A few light clouds are illuminated by the half-moon, and the lights of the City and the Guia lighthouse are still clearly visible to port. They've been this way before many times, everybody has, but to Ling-wah tonight feels different. He's never before been conscious of the moment that they cross into Chinese waters, after all there is no border line, no dotted line running over the surface of the sea, no border gate, but they all fall quiet as they continue north. Somehow the atmosphere has changed. They all know that this time something is different. The skipper breaks the tension.

'Come on. Let's get started.'

Cousin No.1 cuts the engine to an idle while the skipper and Cousin No.2 start to drop the purse seine, and Ling-wah prepares some long lines with an eye on the grouper that are supposed to be here, though he isn't optimistic; the tales about being able to hear them from the shore seem to be just that – tales. But their labour takes minds off unspoken worries. Three times they lower the net, tighten the seine line, and Cousin No.1 eases the boat forward; three times they raise the net full of sardines, snapper and bream. Even Ling-wah's long lines bring in a decent catch.

'Didn't I tell you? Let's get this sorted and get on our way back.' The skipper is suitably smug, but even Cousins Nos. 1 and 2 are smiling and although they would never admit it, privately they have to concede that he was right to bring them here. The skipper laughs and slaps Ling-wah on the back.

Nets and lines are drawn in, the catch is stowed in ice-boxes, and Cousin No.1 turns the boat for home and goes to gun the engine. Nothing. He pulls the throttle lever back and tries again. Still nothing. The lever moves smoothly enough but the engine remains stubbornly in idle.

‘Fuck.’ Cousin No.1 swears remarkably rarely for a fisherman but this is one of those occasions. He pulls back on the throttle. ‘Something’s wrong,’ he says.

‘No shit,’ says the skipper. The good humour of only moments ago starts to disappear like a gambler’s winnings. It is Cousin No.1’s job to look after the engine – he is the only one thin enough to get into the crawl space beneath the deck. He cuts the engine, opens the access hatch, and curses as he squeezes through the narrow gap.

Two hours later and nothing has changed except their mood. Jubilation with their catch has moved through the stages of irritation and frustration with the engine, to growing anxiety. An increasing worry that is not helped when Ling-wah points out that they are drifting north, further into Chinese waters and closer to the Nine Islands themselves.

‘Fuck,’ says the skipper. ‘You getting anywhere?’ Cousin No.1 grunts something unintelligible from beneath deck and then sticks his head above the access hatch.

‘The cable’s good,’ he says. ‘It’s the throttle valve that’s stuck.’

‘Can you fix it?’

‘What the fuck do you think I’m trying to do?’

None of the crew even notice the approaching patrol boat, so focused are they on the broken engine and the nearby rocks, until that is the first bullets ram into the side of the boat, tearing holes in the already fragile gunwales. Instinctively they throw themselves flat on the deck face down in the stink of the remains of their catch, before another round of gunfire smashes the wheelhouse windows.

‘What the...? Shit! Can’t you get that fucking engine going?’

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He saw her often. Round quiet corners of disused jetties, standing on wharves as a freighter was unloaded. On fishing boats and ferries. Nobody he knew ever believed him when he tried to tell them about her. Parents, teachers, school friends. The kinder ones thought he was just making it all up, they said that he had an imagination for sure, but they soon got tired of him going on about her. Those who were less kind wondered whether he was right in the head and looked at him strangely. They opined that he needed a good beating to get this nonsense out of him. Either way, young though he was, he got the message and stopped talking about her. He certainly didn't tell them about the final time.

For once she was seated, not standing. She was alone on a sampan that was drawn up on the wharves of the Inner Harbour. The fishing fleet was in and she watched on as catches were taken ashore; it seemed to the boy that she must have been getting in the way, and he couldn't understand why nobody seemed to notice she was there. Everyone was oblivious to her as they carried boxes of fish to women waiting with carts. She looked contented as the activity whirled around her. The boy stared at her and wondered why nobody else could see the woman in the bright red dress, and for the first time in their encounters she looked back at him. She smiled and although they were a distance apart he could see her eyes, full of love and caring. He wanted nothing more than to be with her, but the moment they shared was broken when his view was interrupted by a thickset man pushing past him, swearing at him to get out of the way. When the man had gone the woman was no longer there and the sampan was empty. He looked around to see where she might be, but there was no sign of her anywhere, only emptiness in his soul.

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The junk has started to take on water. The gunfire has stopped, at least they think it has, they haven't heard anything in a while, but nobody knows how long it has been, and none of them is in much of a rush to get up off the deck to see. Finally the skipper tells Ling-wah to have a look – this is the privilege of being the youngest – and gingerly Ling-wah raises himself so that he can just about see over to where they think the gunboat had been. He can't see a thing. The clear moonlit sky has

been replaced by a dense fog that seems to have come from nowhere and which swallows up any sound. The sea is calm and still, he guesses that they are still drifting towards the rocks but without being able to see it is impossible to tell for sure. Ling-wah whispers that everything seems to be okay and the others slowly clamber to their feet, looking about them anxiously, expecting a gunshot any moment. The skipper surveys the damage to his boat without saying a word, but the pain is in his face. Cousin No.2 grabs a bucket and starts bailing out. They are all silent. Terrified that the gunboat is listening out for them.

He feels a deep warmth when he sees her. She is standing on the water off the starboard side of the shattered fishing junk. Through the fog her red dress glows like a beacon calling him towards her, summoning him. He knows what he has to do and isn't afraid, he's been waiting for this day for the last ten years. He knew it would come. Cousin No.1 is back working on the engine, Cousin No.2 is still bailing out, and the skipper is trying to repair some of the damage to the wheelhouse; none of them have a chance to stop him when he steps over the side and walks towards her, and by the time he hears their voices calling after him he is lost to them in the fog. Ling-wah knows that she will look after them, and in the distance he hears the engine start.

All will be well, all will be as it should be.