

Brothers of the Night Pearl

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Shanghai, 1930s. The surrealistic and hedonistic ‘Manhattan of China’ is still a smoothly running engine, but only superficially. The colonial neoclassical buildings lining the Bund continue glittering like palaces under the starry sky. The hugs, kisses and laughters of drunken people from around the world ceaselessly fill the boardwalk along Huangpu River. Yet looking beyond this prosperity, even casual observers can detect a mood of panic lurking beneath. The Japanese imperial army has taken Manchuria for years. Their aggression would not stop there. The day they invade Shanghai is imminent. The Chinese government is striving to expose all the undercover agents hiding among us.

Tonight, in front of the City God Temple, Old Shanghai City, the Chinese are unusually elated. The police have arrested a group of Japanese Secret Service agents, and chained them to parade as a show of triumph. The crowds are yelling obscenities. Officers draw bloodred marks on the captured Japanese undercovers’ backs. Some of them are actually Chinese. They are being burnt on the chest with words like ‘traitor’, and ‘guilty of treason’. While the public is furious, my heart pumps with excitement as I scan each of these chained criminals. This will be my last chance to find my long lost brother before my family moves to Hong Kong.

For years, my mother has been telling me that my brother, having studied military knowledge in Japan, joined the Japanese Secret Service, abandoned us and betrayed his country. But I distinctly remember that on one particular day, when I was a toddler, my brother’s cries of agony, his night pearl necklace that was hurled towards me, and the Japanese’ evil cackles. He was abducted and forced to be a spy, I believe. Because of this memory I have been painstakingly searching for his whereabouts. I earnestly hope to see him again to clear his name.

In my eagerness to get a closer look, I trip over something like a foot and fall among excited people. Scrambling back to my feet, I look up and see a lanky man in chains with jet-black hair – exactly like my brother in my memories. My eyes widen and my heart skips a beat. I attempt to get to him, but a gruff voice behind orders me back into the crowd. I lose sight of that man finally. “Never mind,” I convince myself. “I’ll go to the prison if that’s what it takes.”

Two days later I arrive at Tilanqiao Prison, ‘Alcatraz of the Orient’, a heavily guarded, formidable hell for rascals. In this fallen city where money rules, one can easily bribe the guard. He gives me a nonchalant look. Grateful, I immediately rush past the cells, searching for my brother. And... he’s there, at the very end of the gloomy corridor – I still recognize him, although he looks much skinnier, with cheekbones and ribs protruding from flesh like fossil of a baby dinosaur. He is staring at a ray of light sneaking through a tiny crack of the wall. I sit down hesitantly, and begin telling him everything about my family. At last, I let the bomb drop. “I think you’re my brother!” Hearing these words he jerks his head up, startled, and then smirks, his eyes dismissive. Maybe he cannot accept this shocking fact for the moment. So I continue telling him everything that might trigger his emotions toward his family and me.

I’ve been talking for an hour now, and my brother hasn’t even looked up at me. He keeps his eyes downcast, perhaps too ashamed to admit that he abandoned his family when we wanted him most. I decide to show him the most

precious thing to me – my night pearl necklace, the one he threw to me before he was captured. Once I take it out from my pocket, his eyes flash, filling with greed. “Wow, my night pearl necklace. Thanks for taking care of it for me,” he utters. I am blank and yet confused – my brother didn’t ask me to take care of it for him. He gave it to me and asked me to remember him. “Now that I am here, why don’t you return it to me?” he continues, a tint of threat creeping into his voice. A wave of reluctance suddenly washes over me – and also washes my mind clear. I am afraid. Foreseeing my refusal, he rasps, “Give it to me, or you’ll die like you stupid brother!” These appalling words shoot through me like a lightning bolt. Before I can calm down, his gnarly hands reach out trying to grab the necklace. I quickly stuff my night pearl necklace back into my pocket. I glance at ‘my brother’ – his eyes are wild and feral, so intoxicated by the thought of getting the night pearl to buy him freedom, like a rabid dog. Horrified, I race out of the prison into the broad daylight, never to return...

Gazing out of the train window, I see hordes of desperate and frightened people hurling luggage into already overturned vehicles, trying to flee the city before the Japanese comes. These people are just like my brother, trying all means to survive this doomsday world. The Bund washed off its dazzling glitters and transforms into a solemn fortress. My thoughts float back to my brother. Perhaps my brother was really killed. Perhaps he is still in captivity, and being forced to spy on us. Or perhaps that man in the prison really is my brother, but what he has suffered has driven him crazy. I even doubt my memory and start to wonder if my mother is telling the truth. But whatever the truth is, I will never see my brother. Lying ahead of me are numerous uncertainties, but one thing is for sure – I cannot waste the rest of my life searching for him anymore. He wouldn’t want me to either. After all, I’ve got my own life to struggle with.