

Bluebird

By Alexa Harbaugh

Li Wei was 25 years old when he threw away his shoes. He didn't lie like some people do when they make personal choices, and no, it was not bunions or fungus or flat feet that aided in his decision; he simply didn't like them anymore, and that was that. His wife, Lily, did not feel any secondhand embarrassment for her husband's sole-less wardrobe; in fact, she would have joined him if it weren't for the fear of mud tracks in her house or the looks she would receive attending mass. In her singing days, however, she would glide barefoot across the stage like an apparition. Those who sat in the front row below her swear she floated. And among those who swear she floated was a 23-year-old Li Wei, and her bare feet may have been the first thing he noticed the night she performed on a tiny bar stage in the suburbs of Raleigh, though he cannot remember for certain.

She didn't sing like other birds did; it was softer, weightless, and she stretched every syllable as if it were her last. The white gown that went to her ankles filled with air as she cooed "Plum Blossoms," her right hand rising and falling with the notes. She had a halo, but more so, Li Wei's eyes could see a halo, a gift being unwrapped before him like a child on Christmas Day. She had shoulder length black hair, and her eyelids were blotted blue. Her chin came to a soft point, and her lips, tainted red, were nestled elegantly below her small nose. It was a moment Li Wei remembered with such distinction, and in that moment, he knew too, that it was a sight he wouldn't soon forget. And he didn't; for the following days, he sat in her audience among tough flannelled white men and rowdy underage college students, at the tiny bar that he drove two miles out of the way for on his commute home from work, gawking at the perfect woman dancing under a cheap yellow stage light, waiting for the courage to speak to her to hit him over the head.

One cowardly night after another, he found himself, again, walking out the door to his car after the performance. Posters of her in a white dress and bare feet were plastered to the double doors over past performers who've slowly peeled and faded. Her name in blue lettering, he sounded out the words to himself under his breath as he jostled car keys between hands.

"Hi! Hello, excuse me?" came a woman's voice from behind him.

I forgot to pay my tab, he thought.

"I'm sorry, that's my bad I thought I paid," not looking up from the wallet he struggled to get from his pocket, turning around and walking back toward the bar entrance.

"No, no, well, I don't know if you paid but I—"

He looked up slightly and saw bright blue slippers. *It's too cold and who wears slippers to a bar?*

Fingers holding open the fold of his wallet, he lifted his head and saw her wrapped in a petticoat, her hands tucked in either elbow, breath turning white and rising in the cold. There was a glimpse of her white dress tucked beneath. Her face and her eyes and her smile mirroring the poster she stood beside.

"Hi," he forced out.

"Hello," she said through a smile. "This might be a little forward, but are you Chinese? I've seen you here before and thought maybe you were...my parents want me to learn Mandarin and this isn't exactly the best place to find a tutor. You might be the last Asian guy I see for a while haha."

"Um, yeah, yeah I am," he stuttered. "I spoke more when I was a kid but when I moved to the states it became only household stuff like, where's the fabric softener type stuff...you want me to tutor you?" *Where's the fabric softener? I don't know how to say that nor have I ever used fabric softener in my life. Why did I say that?*

"Well, yeah if it's not too much trouble, I mean, I don't know how to talk to my grandparents and somehow it's my fault for not teaching myself how to speak Mandarin as a baby, so, is that

something you'd do? I'd pay you per session and we could meet in public so you don't think I'm trying to murder you," she went on, laughing nervously at her own joke.

"Yes...uh yeah I—I'm Li," he extends his hand toward her.

She stood silent and looked at his hand for a moment, then slowly her lips curled into a smile and then a teeth-bearing grin. She uncrossed one of her arms and shook his, lightly. Her hands were cold but she had a warmth that many feel when greeting family, and her caution suggested confusion; as if she expected something more than a handshake from someone she just met. As if she had known him for years and this was a game between friends.

"Lily," she said.

The following Saturday he sat with her for six hours in an IHOP close to the highway, a middle point between their two homes, and Li Wei taught her every word he knew until he had to read from an English to Mandarin dictionary.

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His watch beeped at five minutes to 1:00pm. He looked up and around him, and grabbed on to the stalk to hoist himself upwards. He walked through the green grove, sun shining through the highest leaves, and held a small black notebook behind his back. The growth of the bamboo he cared for doubled after the rain season, as it should. Bamboo grows tall and fast when taken proper care of. His walk through the garden was his only time away from Lily, and as he emerged from the garden he looked up at the kitchen window where she expected him each day at 1 o'clock. They had moved to Florida only five years ago, and with the money they had saved Li was able to cultivate a garden on their acre large property, hoping within coming years it would only grow in size and height.

Lily smiled through the glass and made her way toward the door. When he stepped inside he rubbed his feet many times over the doormat while she kissed him on the cheek, removed his hat and

coat, and carried them into the kitchen where they are hung up in a small closet. The kitchen was blue tiled with bleached grout. The woks and pans hung from a massive grid above the island, and the island has a 4-top gas stove. Everything that could be blue was blue, in all shades of the color. The tablecloth, the refrigerator, and the bluebird salt and pepper set. Two pots boiled on the stove-top, and every day during the winter Lily made her mother's beef noodle soup. When Li Wei finished washing up, he met Lily simultaneously at the breakfast nook. She placed the bowls at either end of the table and they sat across from each other, placing the black notebook between them. Lily's hair was shorter now, and grey streaks framed either side of her face though her gaze remained the same. They held both hands when they prayed, and though she didn't know it, his eyes were always open, gazing up at look of concentration on her face, reveling in it.

"Amen," she said.

The space between them was filled with the sound of loud slurping and sipping, occasional grunts, and hums. They didn't talk as much during meals as they did when they were younger. Their aging hands were shaky, and often dribbled broth on the table. It had been two years since Li Wei had used chopsticks, and the fork, in his opinion, lacked a certain sophistication expected of dinnerware. The silence they shared so comfortably is a product of the many years they've never run out of conversation, and the knowledge they have little need for spoken words as gestures and glances were enough to understand one another. After thirty minutes of eating, they reclined into the benches, tired and bloated; pausing for a moment before cleaning up. They exchanged soft smiles as Li Wei stood and picked up his wife's empty bowl, beginning to wash dishes. After a few moments of rinsing and drying, he would then put his hat and his coat back on, pick up his notebook off the table, kiss Lily on the cheek, and return to the bamboo garden. They lived many years in this routine, and the days had been perfected. Li Wei saw little change in the manner in which each day went on, but he never considered the day that followed.

Li Wei came home from a long walk and is not greeted at the door with a kiss. He took off his own coat and hat and called her name. In the kitchen that is blue, he spotted a pot of broth boiling over on the stove, unattended. In the breakfast nook, overlooking the garden, she sat upright, eyes open, facing the window where she waited for him each day at lunchtime. Upon taking her hands in his, they felt a different weight, a different texture, and her fingertips were blue. Blue, that was her favorite color, and blue, the color that she wore on her eyelids the night he first saw her, was now the color of her, apart from a thin line of dark blood that crept from her nose and over her lips.

He bought a pair of shoes for the funeral. In the days that followed her death, Li Wei did not acknowledge her absence, simply carrying on as if she were only away for a while. Only when he opened her closet did he feel the weight of his loss. He held up the white dress that once hung around her ankles and pressed the linen between thumbs. A shaking sigh escaped as tears welled in his eyes, and soon he found himself burying his face in the cloth, searching for her as if she'd been hiding within the garment, breathing in whatever scent of her was left. A whistling then came from the window.

The dress still in hand, he followed the sound to the kitchen, and through the stained glass he saw a bluebird hovering, calling to him. He went to the door, took off his shoes, and stepped outside. The bird flew in circles around him, and his eyes fixed on the bird and nothing else as he followed it blindly down the hill and into the garden. Not until the green stalks of bamboo suddenly filled the sky did he realize where he was. He stood among the trees and listened, as the bluebird sang "Plum Blossom" from above.