

The Box

The ceramic box rattled in the basket of Chang Lo's bicycle as she pedaled along the rough streets of Shanghi. *Why did the old man give me a box?* Without saying a word he had simply handed it to her across the counter of the fish shop and left, his large watery eyes as much a warning as an invitation.

Chang Lo closed the shutters and carried the fish back into the coolness of the ice room as soon as the old clock had chimed seven. On most days she would remain open until seven-thirty or eight, hoping that word of her diligence would find its way to Mr. Ling and that, if the gods were kind to her, she might be given a raise. *Mother will probably be dead before then*, she thought as she locked the rear door that night.

The front tire of the bicycle barely missed a large pile of horse dung on the cobblestone street. Her left foot was at the bottom of a pedal stroke so her toe was not as lucky. The brown mess streaked the side of her shoe. *Ah well*, she looked down and grimaced. *It will smell no worse than the alley*.

Her tiny apartment sat off what must have been the most decrepit alley in Shanghi, the one all the homeless men used as a toilet. Some days the smell of human excrement was overwhelming. But now it was the rainy season, and most of the filth would be washed away overnight. *At least I hope*, she thought. But in order to save all she could and return home she dared not spend more on rent.

The box was carefully removed from the basket and tucked inside her coat when she reached the apartment. The slender young girl was strong from hauling the large fish about the shop for the last three years, and she easily carried her bicycle up the two flights of stairs on the outside of her building. With practice she had learned to get to her

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room and unlock the door in less than two minutes, both so she could hold her breath in the alley as well as to avoid any men that might still be lingering.

She squeezed the old bicycle into her tiny apartment and quickly locked the door. Perhaps on this night she had heard footsteps on the stairs behind her, but she did not pause to check.

The room was empty save for the sleeping mat in the corner and a small wooden table with no chair. Chang Lo knelt in front of the table and carefully placed the box upon it. The green glaze glowed in the light of her single candle. *It is a treasure!* She was not sure whether to open it or not.

After a few minutes, curiosity overwhelmed the girl and she gently lifted the lid. It was surprisingly heavy for the size of the small container, no more than six inches square, and she could hear the unglazed clay along the rim scrape on the lip of the box.

The sound sent a chill up Chang Lo's spine, and she almost dropped the lid. Was it excitement or fear? She was not sure what she felt. But she took a breath and set the lid aside.

Leaning forward on her knees, she peered with large brown eyes over the edge of the box. There were only two items resting within: a compass and a piece of rice paper. *What does it mean?* Her fingers tingled as she reached in and picked up the compass. The brass around the small glass was corroded in places as though someone had discarded it years ago. As it rested in her palm, the needle swung in apparently aimless circles. Still, for the poor girl it was a treasure.

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She cupped the compass in one hand and with the other reached in for the small piece of paper. It was smooth beneath her touch. *Made by a master. How exciting!* She turned it over to reveal a single Chinese character: Mother.

Mother? Why would it say that? She held the two items from the box side by side in her hands, the compass and the paper. “Mother,” she read aloud.

Suddenly the compass spun to the northwest, toward her own village, and locked into place. A low hum vibrated through the tiny room more in her head than in her ears. Before her the box began to glow. With a start she fell backward, her arms bracing her on the bare floor, the compass and the paper still cupped in her hands. The glow grew brighter.

With a deep breath, Chang Lo crawled back onto her knees and leaned forward once more to peer into the box. From within the glow a pair of old brown eyes looked back out at her, pleading.

“Mother!” was the last word she exclaimed before she slipped into the box.