

# A Colour of Loss

FREYA COX

I named you Bai, meaning *White*, because that was the colour of the sky you were born under. A colour of mourning. A colour of loss. The clouds blanketed the sky, only allowing a weak trickle of sunlight through. I squatted on the ground, behind the rice paddies, out of sight of the village that curved around the edge of the fields. My fingers dug into the wet dirt in front of my toes, my thighs strained.

I gritted my teeth, holding in the agonised cries that threatened to burst out of me. My jaw ached where I clenched it tight. Blood slid down my thighs and stained the dirt black.

I hunched for hours behind the fields, watching people, tiny in the distance, bob through the green rows of rice. A crow flapped across the sky in front of me, its dark wings a bad omen.

When you finally came, I cupped my hands beneath me and felt you slip into my waiting palms, filling them with your warm, damp weight. I held your wrinkled, bloody body to my breast, marvelling at the life I held in my hands.

Your nose was the size of my thumbnail and as soft as a petal of the lotus flowers that grow in the pond next to our house. Your tiny eyelids were like two halves of velvet bean pods, sheltering your eyes from the cruelties of this world. Your crumpled mouth opened just a slit to take in the morning air, exposing your waving, pink tongue.

You started to cry, mewling whimpers at first, then your face scrunched up and you wailed to the sky. I cried with you, tears streaming down my face.

I was married to Zhang Wei when I was sixteen. His village was a morning's walk from mine, and my father had met his mother at the autumn market and agreed to the match. They had begun bargaining over the price of a chicken and ended up bargaining over the price of my hand in marriage. My father agreed to provide two goats as a dowry, small smelly creatures that would accompany me into my new life, bleating all the way.

On our wedding day I wore a new red dress, the most expensive garment I'd ever owned. The fabric scratched, but I felt like a princess. I was excited right up until the moment I had to say goodbye to my mother. Then it hit me I was leaving home forever and I sobbed, suddenly nothing more than a scared child.

I moved into the house Zhang shared with his elderly mother. It was built from earthen bricks, with a thatched roof that needed mending each summer. There were two rooms, one that we all slept in, lying together on woven mats, and a cooking room where I spent most of my time.

It wasn't a bad marriage. Zhang worked in the fields during the day, coming home in the evening to shovel down the rice I had cooked for dinner.

He was quietly pleased when I announced I was pregnant. He sipped his tea from a clay cup, sitting on a wooden stool, and nodded. 'Good. It will be a boy.'

I placed my hands upon my stomach, feeling the slight bulge that would become you, and prayed he was right.

One of our neighbours had been pregnant during winter, when food was scarce. Her family had been struggling to make ends meet, and a baby would be an extra strain. If the child were a boy all would be well. A boy would bring in food and a wife to care for you in your old age. Girls only take. Take food, and then money for a dowry, leaving you alone as your body grows weak and your eyesight fails.

We heard the woman's screams tearing open the night as she gave birth. There was never any sign of the baby.

When I got up to go to the toilet in the night I saw her husband carrying a small bundle outside. There was a large wooden bucket next to their back door, where they kept water. In the morning, tiny fine black hairs floated in it and there was a smear of blood upon the rim.

The woman never seemed quite right after that, a haunted look in her eyes.

The first time I saw you was in a dream. You danced through my mind, a child already, running on chubby legs. I loved you so much. But a black crow flapped in the corner of my dream,

casting a shadow where you played. When I woke I was filled with fear. Lying next to Zhang, feeling the heat radiating from his body, I stared into the dark, my heart racing.

When I felt the pains start and knew my time had come, I told my mother-in-law I was going to visit my mother in her village. 'Don't wait up,' I said. 'I will be gone late.'

'You shouldn't go, not in your condition.' My mother-in-law frowned at me.

'I feel fine. Don't worry. I will see you tomorrow morning.' I feared she would stop me, but she let me leave.

I stumbled in the direction of my family's village, before staggering off the path and finding a secluded spot behind the fields. There I gave birth, alone beneath a wide, white sky. The crow perched on a tree branch across the field and cawed at me.

Then I did something I had hoped I would never have to do.

When I was done, the day had slipped away. I went back to the house. It was dark now, my husband in bed. I stuffed some rags between my legs to stem the bleeding and crawled into bed.

Unable to sleep, I recited a poem to myself that my grandmother had taught to me.

*The thread in the hands of a fond-hearted mother  
 Makes clothes for the body of her wayward boy;  
 Carefully she sews and thoroughly she mends,  
 Dreading the delays that will keep him late from home.  
 But how much love has the inch-long grass  
 For three spring months of the light of the sun?*

The ancient poem speaks of the strength of a mother's love. It is a timeless thing. That's when I realised that this hollow, leaden ache in my chest, the feeling that part of me is missing, would never leave.

I woke with the sun and walked into the cooking room where my mother-in-law was already lighting a fire to boil water for breakfast. She looked up when I came in. 'How was your visit to your village?'

Before I could answer, her eyes latched onto the bloody rags clutched in my hand and she blanched.

'I didn't make it to the village,' I said. My free hand rested on my belly, still swollen from carrying you, but now empty and sagging.

In an instant she was on her feet, grabbing my wrist. Her claw-like fingers dug into my skin. 'Where is the baby?'

Zhang came into the room, yawning sleepily. 'You have delivered already? Where is my son?'

'I miscarried on the way to the village,' I whispered. 'It was a boy. I buried him outside our house.'

'Why would you not keep him for me to see?' he roared, suddenly awake, his eyes blazing with anger.

'He was not right,' I said softly. 'Not formed properly. It was best to bury him before the neighbours saw.'

I took them both behind the house and showed them a dug-up plot of earth underneath a tree with low hanging branches.

'I buried him here.'

Zhang knelt in the dirt and prayed over the grave of his son. He bent his head and asked his ancestors to protect our child, not knowing he knelt above nothing but dirt and earthworms.

After I held you in my arms I paid a man and his wife who were travelling to the city to take you with them. They promised to deliver you to an orphanage, a promise I could only pray they would keep.

I remembered the dream I'd had, the dream so clear it was almost a vision. The dream that had set in me a fear of things to come and made me realise I could not give birth in this house.

In that dream you twirled in the grass. Your little feet were bare, a red skirt swung around your knees, and your long dark hair swished over your shoulders. A sight I would never be able to see in this life.

You could not stay with me, my heart, my life, my daughter.

*Freya Cox has travelled around China four times. She is currently a student of Chinese language and has a strong interest in modern Chinese history. This story incorporates the famous classical Chinese poem, 'A Traveller's Song'. Freya was inspired by her travels and reading on China to write about the widespread historical practice of female infanticide.*

