

Third Wife

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June mornings in Singapore hang like woolen blankets on a line, the air cloying, jellying in the lungs. The rain, when it comes, shrugs southward across the city. It pulls at the high fronds of the palms on Mount Sophia until it reaches and whistles the glass panes of Eu Villa. The house rises like a pillar above the harbor city, spire-topped at each corner, the church-like dome at its center looming far, far above. It is the task of the servants—at once, it would seem—to swing the windows open and aside, to allow the air through the marble halls and down to the city and then on across the strait to Sumatra.

Rain clips the awning of Reumah's cottage. It was her husband's gift to her: a quiet home aside the villa, the view from her room overlooking the city spread below.

Kai Tian has opened the bedroom window and a fine mist smatters Reumah's hand and the shoulder of her green *cheongsam*. She knows that tomorrow, on another rain-laden morning like this, the family will wonder, where has the old wife gone? Where is *di san* and her puckered lips and her pipe? They will say her little feet could not hold her back.

Reumah feels a twinge below her left ankle.

"It will hurt more if you resist," Kai Tian reminds her, sliding her fingers under the silk wrapped around her mistress's feet. She says this daily, as though Reumah has grown old and forgetful before thirty.

Reumah lifts the long pipe to her mouth and inhales, watching her daughters through the doorway. They have cut up bits of paper and begin coloring the pieces with pencils. They place them over their dolls and laugh when the bottoms don't extend far enough or when the shirts are too low. They clothe them fully—in hats, dresses, little necklaces and gloves. They are both of them light-skinned

and dark-eyed like Eu Tong Sen, their father. Their *amahs* curl their hair like coquettish European girls who will giggle at everything they cannot understand. The younger one has become still, one pink paper shirt still in her hand as she stares at Kai Tian's hands. The silk comes away quickly and the single large toe begins to protrude from the top. Reumah holds the smoke inside her chest until her body forces her to exhale, filling the room. Kai Tian does not slow.

Later, Reumah will teach the girls the most important aspect of *mahjong*: keeping a serene face. She lifts a dragon tile and turns it between her fingers, pressing it harder as Kai Tian pulls away the bits of cloth stuck to her toes. Kai Tian is the only woman to have touched her feet since Reumah was four and her grandmother folded the four toes under with one hand. She remembers the little woven shoes that she was given to wear and the way she was made to sleep for weeks beforehand: on her chest, legs straight. Most of all, she remembers that it started with chicken blood and *reishi* in the time before binding was banned.

"Swish swish, you hear?" Grandmother's quick fingers had played in the bowl. Reumah lay on the floor of their home, a soft blanket folded beneath her. "That's the sound of marriage for you."

Grandmother took up the white cloth beside the bowl and ran it once over Reumah's face and her bare feet. Then she picked up a file and began working at the nail of the big toe on Reumah's right foot, singing the only happy song she knew. Her voice was no good. It was like a holey drum.

"I don't know why you cried," Grandmother said. "Look at how I pamper even the dirtiest part of you."

Grandmother had left a candle too close to Reumah's soles and she would have said something but the poppy tea that her mother had given her was bitter and strong. Instead she watched Grandmother's black shadow on the ceiling as she lifted each of Reumah's feet and set them in the chicken blood for softening.

The first binding was unbearable. She remembers her hoarse wail and how it sounded even after her mother's hand fell across her mouth and one nostril. It was then, trying to breathe through

the phlegm and pain, that Reumah had fainted. When she awoke it was to her grandmother's voice. "Like a lotus," she had said, turning the bound feet in different directions to admire them. Reumah's arches were wrapped straight and her legs were as level as sanded wood. Her knees looked like man-made hills. "Every man will admire you, and every flat-footed woman will wish it had been done for her."

When the ban came in China, her mother wanted to unbind Reumah's feet. Grandmother had been performing the binding for seven years and she clung to the folded feet as though they were her own, her body snakelike over the bed. When her mother insisted—"they call it antiquated, barbaric"—Grandmother pulled off the wrappings, undid them like a ribbon, and she held up both of Reumah's feet for her mother to see. "If we stop now," she said, "the feet will go half back. They will unfold only a little and then she won't be lotus or flat-footed...just malformed." Her mother shrank away then. Grandmother rebound the cloth that night, tugging the silk so tight it was as though some progress had been lost with the momentary freedom of Reumah's feet.

It was true what her grandmother had told her of men. By the time she was fourteen—only three years before her marriage—her hips swayed like palm fronds in the wind. When she left her home she refused the shoulder of her *amah*—she would not even accept a cane. Reumah had walked with painful steps through the streets of Singapore, happy in her discomfort and the unusual step it lent to her walk.

Two months ago the smallest toe on her left foot had fallen off and she hadn't known it until Kai Tian changed the bindings and a black nub fell to the ground. Reumah had her wrap it up in a cloth napkin and put it aside, afraid of the feel of it between her own fingers. Later she had unwrapped the cloth and stared at the toe in her palm until the sun went down and Kai Tian returned to help her into her nightdress.

When Tong Sen first came to her at night, he had admired the old fashion in her feet, the pretty little silk shoes she wore even though she only walked a few feet in them at a time. He took them

off gently and said, “You are perfect, like a doll,” and he had run his fingers from the bindings up her leg to her powdered cheeks.

She draws at length from the pipe as Kai Tian kneads each foot. “Another one falling out,” she says, looking up at Reumah as though she should come and see for herself. “You want me to take it off?”

“No,” Reumah says. She watches as the girls leave their dolls and run outside, their laughter muffled through the walls. Their *amahs* follow them out.

Kai Tian lowers each foot into a bowl of water. The feel of her wet hands on the sensitive arches makes Reumah’s skin prickle. “That’s enough,” she says. “Put the wrappings back on.” The woman ignores her and dabs at her feet with a wet cloth. Every touch feels distant and familiar, like her grandmother’s hands from many years ago. “Do you hear, Kai Tian?”

She does not hear. Her dark fingers press into Reumah’s papery skin. The sensation is like sparks off an ember. There is life in them still.

In the evening Reumah will use her feet for the first time in five years. She knows that it is time; when she looks around her boudoir the smell of it comes on her suddenly—a stink that one must see to know. Long layers of silk hang from her bedposts to the floor. The corners of her dresses peek from the drawers of her bureau and she forbids Kai Tian to arrange them properly. In the corner, a little wooden rack of shoes, two pair to a panel, stands from the floor to the height of the window. They are smaller than her oldest daughter’s. She doesn’t notice their smell until she lifts one from its place, touches her finger to the inseam and a fine dust comes away. Whether it is ash from her pipe or powder from her tin, she can’t say, but when she lifts her finger to her nose—and she always does—it is there. Even on Sundays when the wrappings are new, it is there. She has lived at Eu Villa for so long that even the dark wood of her furniture is steeped in it.

Reumah was not always the old wife. There were two others before her, and it seemed to Reumah that the first wife was already

growing matronly when she herself arrived at seventeen. Both women had come up to her with their hands together at their chests and kissed her on the cheeks, their lips cold and slick. First wife, Mary, had lines crosswise and lengthwise on her forehead that she tried to cover with a sheaf of fringe. The front of her dress was tight at her uneven waist. Second wife was more conservative: she kept her hair back with a brooch and veiled her large eyes under her half-closed lids. The three of them stood in the great tiled foyer of Eu Villa while Tong Sen looked Reumah over. “I was told about your feet,” he said. “Will you walk for us?”

Grandmother had put Reumah’s best shoes on her feet that morning. They were of a blue silk with pink and green flower stitching and thin gold laces. When her grandmother measured their length with her hand, she looked as though she were grasping an invisible glass of water. “Almost as small as the day we started,” she said, and then she had cried and held Reumah, repeating again and again her pride.

Reumah had walked for Tong Sen and his two wives. The pain was greater than she had ever felt because the little shoes had never been worn and they were tight and unforgiving. But she walked—did not wobble—swayed as she should have, and her new husband did the same that night. He gave her one of the little cottages on the grounds because, as the second wife would come to tell her, “the villa is for two things: entertaining Tong Sen’s Christian conscience and his British friends.”

Her name was once Soo Mei. It was the day after her arrival thirteen years ago that her husband had come to her with an open Bible, the red ribbon hung down the center and his finger up in the air as though he were testing the wind. “What do you think of this one, out of Genesis?” and he had pointed to the spot where her name had always been: Reumah, Nahor’s concubine. At the time, Reumah thought her cheeks might still be flushed from the night before. She had run her hand over her smooth hair, which hung straight down over her back and shoulders, and said, “Yes—that is pretty. Reumah.”

On the wall opposite her chair is an edge-curved mirror that Reumah will stare at when she must. What reflects is Kai Tian's slim back, her long braid of hair, and then above her, that false woman with too-dark eyebrows and a series of wooden sticks holding her black hair in place on top of her head. When she brings the pipe to her mouth, her fingernails tap against the wood like the long beak of a pecker bird and her mouth puckers into a hundred small lines. Beneath the layers of shining silk—beneath the tight collar at her neck—she feels her body formed to the chair, soft and pliant.

When she leaves she will close the room up and hide the brass key somewhere safe. No one will be able to get into Reumah's little boudoir unless they break the door or climb in the window, and the window she will lock as well. Her oldest daughter will be persistent, as she always is, and may in a few weeks or months insist that the door be opened. She will be the first into the room and she will see the rack of little shoes and the eyelet lace hanging out of the drawers. She will see the pink silk hung off the bed in layers. She will see the pieces of the long-stemmed pipe placed aside on the vanity. And when she does, all of it—all of it—will bring the stink to her nose like a rotten peach and she will want to get away from that room just as fast as her mother did. She will want to run away like Reumah.

"The white or the yellow?" Kai Tian holds up the two lengths of cloth, one in each hand. She does not smell it anymore, after so many years spent hunched next to the feet. She touches them as she would her own.

Reumah points to the white with the end of her pipe. It is the color of purity. "When you're finished, tell the boy to come in," she says. Zahrin is not a boy, but Reumah feels old.

The wrappings go on quickly. Kai Tian pulls the cloth tight and tucks it under itself. She goes out of the room for a second and calls to the boy. When he comes into the room Reumah raises her arms and he goes to her. She turns her face aside and he puts one arm under her legs and one behind her back to lift her. When he is not around she can sometimes hear him, his voice hidden under one cupped hand, "again to the toilet, again and again."

When Zahrin passes Kai Tian he looks away from her. Kai Tian does the same. He carries Reumah to the bathroom and sets her down there. When he closes the door, she hears the staccato of his voice and the small swells of Kai Tian's. They come clearest to her at night. Reumah will pull the latch on her window and let it swing in a bit, enough for the wind and their words.

Reumah knocks on the door with her cane when she is finished. Zahrin comes inside and lifts her. Sometimes she lays her palm flat on his arm and the thin shirt means nothing when her eyes are closed. His breath always smells like unwetted turmeric, stronger than the dust and ash lining her room.

They meet Kai Tian in the hallway. "Should I bring the girls in for *mahjong*?"

Reumah keeps a serene face. Zahrin has stopped and he stands with her in his arms. Kai Tian appears short before them. "What do you think?" She looks to Zahrin. His Chinese is poor and his English is worse. He shrugs with both shoulders, lifting Reumah's body as though it were just a long length of cloth. "I think we will let them stay outside," she says.

Zahrin brings her into the boudoir and sets Reumah back on her chair. She takes hold of his wrist as his hands come away and she says, "Wait," and Zahrin stands still, his held hand still outstretched. "Stay with me," Reumah says. "Kai Tian will have a rest tonight."

Their eyes do meet then: Zahrin and Kai Tian, who stands at the doorway, her hands held tight at the cross of her thighs. "I am not tired," she says.

"But I am tired of you," Reumah says, lifting her cane towards Kai Tian. "You don't do a thing as I ask you to do it, and the boy does each thing before I can ask. He will do my nightdress tonight."

She does not have to hold her cane long; Kai Tian leaves the doorway, her shadow not long behind her as she leaves the apartment. The front door closes so softly that there is almost no noise at all. Zahrin, as still as a monument, bends over Reumah, her fingers still tight on his wrist.

She has smelled the smell of a man in her bedroom before. Tong Sen's welled like a bubble in hot soup, wilting even as it rose. Reumah can hardly remember it, now. Especially now, with the boy's skin under her hand. His scent pervades the room like wisps of smoke, snaking into the far corners, through the eyelet holes of the lace, under the clawed feet of the dresser, up the rack of little shoes and right into her nose.

"There will be none of what you think there will be," Reumah says. She drops his arm. Zahrin straightens his body but his face does not change. His tanned cheek and straight nose are illuminated by the afternoon sun. Reumah drops the end of her cane to the floor and taps it there. "Do you understand?"

It is only when she stares at him, as she does now, with her lips pursed and her eyes wide that he realizes that she expects him to do or say something. His face, as always, grows suddenly bashful. He smiles and draws in a little, his shoulders hunching. "I understand, Mem." He always says that, too.

"First, close the window. I know Kai Tian is out there."

He goes to the window and pulls the latch shut, drawing the lock over the top. He stays a moment before coming back to her.

"This is what I have to say," she says. "And when I am finished, if you will do this thing for me, I will give you all the money and jewels I have. You can give it all to Kai Tian—you can live together, away from this place. But you can never tell her or anyone what you've done."

Zahrin stands still, his fingers lacing and unlacing, but he bows his head as though he is not surprised at all. It is her chance to speak, and Reumah resolves never to call him a boy again.

She begins slowly, as if the words are honeyed to her tongue. She tells him of the chicken blood and *reishi*, of the hundreds of small breaks a foot may undergo before it is fully broken, of the way her mother pinioned her arms to her side while the wrap went on, tighter than skin, the cloth as white as her paling face. It was only a year before Grandmother gave her the long pipe—showed her how to close her lips around it and suck in and all the exactness

would fall away until she felt that the cloud around her *was* her and she remembers that she never wanted to be exact again. And then Reumah's face is in her hands, and the sobs are silent—everything is silent because Zahrin does not move unless to fulfill her wish. She only spends a minute before she wipes the tears onto her hand. There is much still to say.

There is Tong Sen, drawn to her—nightly at first—and then sporadically, his arrival darker and darker, dark as a shade until she would wake and he was there on top of her, his hand over her doll-like face, his other far below, and all the while she would only think, "Are the wraps coming undone?" and something clouded about her fate. Soon she knew his silhouette better than his face, the sound of his breath better than his voice, the tight grip of his hands better than their touch. Most of all, she knew his smell, and how little it differed from the rot of her room—a bit more like fish bait.

And then he didn't come at all because there was a fourth and a fifth and sixth and seventh and then an eighth, none of them bound by anything except the desires of Tong Sen as to whether they should be on the bed or the floor, in the apartment or in his own vast bedroom, the posts hung with rich red silk that she had only heard about. Sometimes she hears his voice from the veranda of the grand villa and, because Zahrin will not know this word, she admits: there is nothing she loathes more.

It was all of it fine, she explains, until the physician came last month with his small spectacles and his little way of coughing into his shirt sleeve that made his black hair fall into his eyes. He kept pushing it aside as he prodded the toes with his white-gloved hands and then he stood and pushed the hair aside once more as he said, "All of it has to go," and then his white-gloved hand was level, cutting through the air. Reumah could see a little black smudge there on the index finger and then she wondered if it was her feet or her pipe and she had truly looked around the room for the first time and saw the whole place was littered in it.

She points to Zahrin's tanned toes in their sandals. "If I could, I would be a man. I would cut off these little nubs and take your

large feet.” She leans down and begins to tug at the tail of the fresh wrapping, undoing Kai Tian’s quick work. Reumah hears the creak of wood as Zahrin begins to step forward, but then he stops. He stays and she sees, peripherally, his eyes gone wide. She begins to unwind the cloth from its figure eight wrapping, faster and faster, the binds shrinking until it seems there could be no more cloth, the feet are so small, but there is still layer upon layer to unbind until she reaches her blackened skin. Reumah and Zahrin stare at the feet, and she remembers seeing a little tintype of an American dancer, dressed up in lace, her body balanced on her toes in her fine bright shoes. Reumah’s two little feet are what that American’s would be if, as in the photograph, she spent all her years in that position, on those two sets of toes, her life some endless struggle towards grace. “But I cannot. I cannot be a man.”

Outside, beneath the florid sky, there is the muffled laughter of two women passing the cottage.

“I do it, Mem,” Zahrin says in his Malay English. “I take you out of here.”

In the evening, the girls and their *amahs* play in the sitting room. Reumah sits on her bed, watching the lantern-light out her window while Zahrin straightens out her long sleeping dress. He does not work like Kai Tian: his hands are large and his fingers slow, but he does it well enough. Out of his pant pocket she can see the head of the brass key to her boudoir. She wonders where they will go—whether they will stay in Singapore or travel to Malaysia, or cross the strait to Sumatra and live simply. If necessary, he will carry her wherever she needs to go. He will be good to her.

Reumah does not hear any knock from Kai Tian that night. When all the wives’ apartments go silent and the lights grow small like withering fireflies, that is when she wishes that Kai Tian would come, but Reumah’s words ensured that she would not.

She gathers up the *mahjong* tiles into a velvet bag that she ties tight. She sits it upright on the playing table. “These will go to the girls,” she says. “Ask Kai Tian, please, to teach them, before you go.”

“Yes,” he says. He struggles to find more words. “Yes, Mem, she do.”

Zahrin sits next to Reumah on the bed, their shoulders brushing as she brings the pipe to her mouth once more and breathes in on it and then out, the smoke only visible in soft curls at the window. She hands the pipe to Zahrin. “Break it,” she says.

There is no hesitation in the way the wood pops and then splinters. Zahrin sets the two halves on the dresser before he picks Reumah up and takes her out through the bedroom door, her long nightdress shielding his legs.

Outside it is a thick night, full of bugs and moonlight and air like melted butter. Zahrin crosses the long yard to the gate and he waits while Reumah undoes the latch and they pass through. He takes the thin, windy path down the hill away from Eu Villa and soon his footsteps have less of a tap than a soft, powdery step as he pushes through the sand. Over his shoulder Reumah sees the hill and the incline straight up to the villa, the large house backed by all the little apartments that she cannot see. There is only one light in a window on the third floor, and she stares at it until Zahrin’s steps are flooded and she can feel the spray through the bottom of her dress.

He continues on, his legs wading in that *swish, swish* kind of way that Reumah now recalls. When the water touches her bare feet she cannot feel it until it reaches the ankle, and then it is warm and she exhales as though her chest were stoppered with years of smoke. Soon they are both immersed to the shoulders and Reumah’s dress buoys up around them. Zahrin’s hands are tight on her back and legs.

“Lift me,” she says. And he does, his strong arms extending as he lifts her body until she is level with the water. Her head goes back and the salt water rushes into her ears as she floats, arms out and palms up. The moon is a shining sliver, and by the time she has left his arms, she thinks, it will already be on its way to a half, and then three quarters, and maybe by the time she has floated all the way to Sumatra, where she will live simply, it will be full.

“Zahrin,” she says. Her voice sounds contained in a jar. “Tomorrow I will be thirty.”

He does not answer—or maybe she cannot hear it. But she knows that what will happen is this: there will be a party, and the wives will wonder, “Where is Reumah with her pipe and her cane?” but Zahrin will not say; he will keep a serene face. And finally they will see that she is gone, and they will wonder: Did she walk? Did she run? Even if he told them—and here she smiles—they would not believe that the old wife simply floated away. ❧