

A rider on a jade horse

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It was in 1959, about two o'clock in the afternoon of a Parisian September day. More than ten times since morning, Olga, the maid, had made her way in and out of the kitchen with a certain service plate. This time she paced into kitchen, and with a growing thought, she looked through the window, then determinedly, plonked the service plate on the larder, tore her apron strings apart and threw the apron with the laundry. Without her uniform, she walked quickly through the kitchen, almost jogged up the garden path, and came to a stop opposite Maria, the so-called Mrs. Lee. Mrs. Lee had been checking account books, and now took her afternoon coffee break under a frondent chestnut tree. She was netting her demure blonde hair smoothly into Victoria rolls. The hairstyle was rather old looking, but it had been very well curled and pinned and should not fit only her perfectly, but also any other pale French, 17th arrondissement housewife. Two chignons over her head were still piled up high, though wired to each other slightly on the tips.

"It's not my fault." Olga announced. "I am not going to work for him anymore. I'd say nobody could get on with him."

"That's not true," Mrs. Lee said plainly. "Take a break and try it again."

A plate of madeleines, golden brown, sticking to each other like the chignons over Mrs. Lee, lay in the middle of the coffee table. Mrs. Lee picked one from the plate with two fingers. She handed it to Olga, who had no choice but to hold it with both her hands.

"Try it again. Please. Try it again. Take some madeleines with you," said Mrs. Lee. She had a sip of cappuccino, then put more sugar into it and stirred thoroughly, but didn't bring it to her mouth immediately. "If the book cannot be sorted out before tonight, I will not be able to go to Madame Butterfly." She looked at the fence across Olga, who opened her mouth, as if something stuck in her throat, and then took a bite of the madeleine instead. "It's not your fault," Mrs. Lee reasoned with Olga. "Things just don't work out the way you want. It's not your fault you let him know all about Jean. He'll know it sooner or later. Please don't take it as your fault."

Olga responded with crumbs in her mouth. "I had no idea he wasn't sleeping. Really. If I had known, I would have taken care of my tongue. I mean, who knows a sleeping man can hear? Mrs. Lee, I called him before you came in – some ten times – and he didn't make a sound. He should be sleeping. Why wasn't he?"

"Well, I'm sure that it's not your fault."

“Now he doesn’t eat anything,” Olga complained. “It seems like all my fault but no, I’d say it’s not.”

“Those account books tired me out,” Mrs. Lee agonized. “It would be awful, you know, if he didn’t change his mind and something terrible happened to him...”

“It’ll be my fault and I’ll be a goddamned murderer!” Olga shouted out. “How could Mr. Lee do that to me?”

“He was a wonderful, wonderful businessman. No doubt the best Chinese antique dealer in France.” Mrs. Lee raised the cup to her nose and recalled. “Bold and intelligent, he was.”

“I don’t know, Mrs. Lee. I shouldn’t put a finger into your family business,” Olga snorted. “Mr. Lee’s awfully confused since he fell ill. I mean, he left his money and all to Mr. Lee Junior. He left nothing to you. He left nothing to Miss Lee. He left nothing for himself, not even the house. I don’t know why he put all his eggs in one basket. Now it comes back.”

“I don’t know how he could handle all those things: tax, expenses, papers. It kills me.”

Olga looked at the faded red façade of the house. A green chestnut fell and hit her shoulder. She spurned it, moving up her eyes to the corner of the rusty green roof where a tit, said to drive away bad luck, perched, its beak open. “I ‘m not going to work for him. I don’t like to clean up his filthy bed and everything. I’m not a nurse.” She threw Mrs. Lee a telling glance, “Mrs. Lee, I don’t know. Things just changed. He’s old. He is dangerously confused. It’s not right for you.”

“If only Jean hadn’t sold everything and thrown every franc in the casino...” Mrs. Lee drank her coffee in small sips, and picked two raspberries out of the fruit basket. “I might need another cappuccino.”

“If Mr. Lee happens to get worse - I say if... Mrs. Lee, people might think it’s your fault, but I am pretty sure it’s not.”

“The numbers made me out of breath. Why hasn’t Lola been around?” Mrs. Lee dusted a spoonful of sugar onto the raspberries and tasted one of them, “Olga, I am so sorry to bring this up again. But what did you do when your husband got cancer last year?”

This sort of question was just made for Olga. She spread her legs, leaned forward and stretched her neck, speaking in a furtive voice. “In the first place, I am sure it’s not my...”

“It couldn’t be your fault,” Mrs. Lee interrupted.

“Though I felt horrible. I had to send him to St. Louise hospital and he died there two months later,” Olga said, bitterly and sweetly, “We paid almost nothing. We kept our apartment after all. I bought him a new suit and a real oak coffin. Heavens, he was the best-looking carpenter...”

“I’m not sure about the health insurance thing, and how much I’ll pay. Oh, God, it’s not my fault he’s still a Chinese after forty years in Paris...”

The front door clicked open and Lola Lee, little daughter of the family Lee, came back home. She was a sallow-skinned, almost Asian-looking girl of twenty-eight, with dowdy semi-blonde hair just reaching her ears. Putting her freckled flat face aside, she was taller and slimmer than average, dressed in a white shirt, black waistcoat, black trousers, tan brogues and a navy canvas rucksack on one shoulder, adding a touch of machismo to her exoticism. By the time she walked into the kitchen and drank a glass of water, she had noticed the sideways-placed service plate. She corrected it, noting the consumption of beef stew and baguette chunks, and then opened the cupboard above her head, grasping into its corners as she leaned obliquely to keep her balance. Olga and Mrs. Lee kept on their conversation. Mrs. Lee asked for another cup of cappuccino, with great hesitation, as it might be harmful for her asthma.

“Olga!”

“Yes, Miss Lee?” Olga wobbled, raising her voice to a moderate volume.

“Where are the Chinese snacks?”

“Mr. Lee had me throw them away,” Olga answered appropriately. “It was early morning yesterday when he was still willing to talk.”

Lola shut the cupboard and walked over to the garden. “Is there anything left? I thought maybe I’d settle him with some hometown flavors.” She stood at a distance, on the verge of the chestnut tree’s shadow and asked, “do we still have rice soup?”

“I discarded it because it went terribly sour,” replied Olga.

“Never mind. I received Chinese moon cakes from Uncle Kahlo - I remember father doesn’t like them that much. I talked to Uncle Kahlo this morning. We made the decision.”

“Yes?” said Mrs. Lee. “I hope it won’t irritate my asthma. It has been on and off the whole morning.” She gave a series of nervous giggles.

“Certainly it will,” Lola said, slipping her hands into her pockets and turning her back to Mrs. Lee. “The house will be preserved if we sell Lee’s other properties off under price.”

After a short silence, Mrs. Lee asked, "Lola my dear, we don't have to move, do we?" She couldn't help giggling again.

Looking up though the early afternoon light, Lola shielded her eyes with her hands, so that she could view the window on the first floor in steady focus. "No, Mom. Don't you worry anymore."

"All in all, he left some francs for us," Mrs. Lee giggled, a few tears eking out. "Even if Jean had most of his fortune ruined."

Lola blinked to moisturise her dry eyes. "Father won two villas somewhere near Cannas, when he played Mahjong with his Chinese friends years before. He rented them out. Never earned a fortune. I think he's well prepared – for accidents of – to financially rescue, mainly his friends. He's not prepared it for himself so he didn't tell us."

"Isn't Mr. Lee the one who ran the ark?" Olga said cordially. "For God's sake, I forget his name."

"Noah he is." replied Mrs. Lee. "Lola, now tell me what else we shall get."

Lola answered with a shrug. "Home is all."

"Oh!" exclaimed Olga.

"Villas were signed over to make a financial contribution after his first stroke," Lola said, putting her hands down as the sunlight withdrew. She took out a mini sketchbook from the upper pocket of her waistcoat and began pointing a pencil vertically and horizontally, while the other two watched her agitatedly. "Remember last time he refused to eat? When I called for a Chinese doctor? Not Doctor Liao we often visited but a Liu or Woo."

"Was it helpful?" asked Olga.

"The acupuncture? ," laughed Mrs. Lee. "Didn't work at all. We had to send him to hospital."

"They found him suffering from a stroke after we left – that's why he wasn't able to open his mouth. Now I think he was dangerously ill then - they clearly remembered he was half dead. He wrote a note and asked them not to tell us about his condition. They didn't."

"Hal-Le-Lu-Jah!" said Olga. "I mean why did he go fasting in the first place"?

Lola drew an oval, more like a square than a circle. "Uncle Hughes and his wife that afternoon asked him to donate towards some renovations of a museum. He refused. They called him little Chinaman behind his back. That's what I think he's angry about."

“How did he come up with the idea of zipping his mouth?” asked Olga. “I mean, when did he first do this?”

Mrs. Lee flicked the rim of her coffee cup and passed a blank look at Lola.

“Well, at his fiftieth birthday,” Lola started deliberately, “a close Chinese friend - I just can’t get her name right - spread the word that she sold fake antiques in their business all the time. Completely normal was he when he heard it, except for rejecting any food and drink during his birthday party. The following day, he bet a thousand and lost it all at Long champ in one go, without a word. That’s all I know.” Lola sighed softly. A wind was blowing, causing a brief wavering blaze of sunlight. Quite a few chestnuts dropped to the lawn. Some of them were cracked open. Lola put her sketchbook back into her pocket. She started to walk back to the house. “I smelled tangerines in the kitchen.” She said, “I’ll take some upstairs and have a try.”

Mrs. Lee and Olga both watched Lola close the sliding door to the kitchen, then looked at each other. Olga smacked her lips and gave an intense smile.

“It’s not anyone’s fault as I told you. Not even the God. He believes in Buddha.” Mrs. Lee concluded and smiled. “Now I am feeling very well to get dressed and wear that new floppy hat. It cost me a Ming bowl.”

Lola closed the wooden door behind her. She was in a classic Chinese-styled bedroom, with glaring sunlight through the carved window, sombre and cold. In the middle of the room lay a golden screen. Lola walked past it and stopped. An antique bed leaned against the back wall. King-size, roofed with an entire piece of lustrous red wood, the canopy bed was covered by a silken, rosy grapery. Around the bed, there were four side tables and a footstool, made of the same delicate material as the bed. Judging from the patterns of dusts, they were with some decors formerly. Lola heard a small groan coming from the sleeping area, and was aware of someone lying flat. He was breathing fragiley, almost silently, and looked as if he were a set of ironed pyjamas.

It was September, but the warmth of the bedroom was just enough for Lola. She silently placed the service plate on the nearest side table, then came forwards, opened the grapery and looked down upon the person. After she looked his face up and down several times, she turned away smilingly, with tears in her eyes. Her father, Mr. Lee, facing the roof of the bed, didn’t roll his eyes.

“Good afternoon, Dad.” She looked back. “Lola’s back.”

Opening his eyes much wider, Lee seemed to disprove his paralysis with all his strength. He pulled his neck sharply forward, and lifted his right shoulder to the left, determined to turn himself over.

"It's Lola," she sat on the footstool and said. "Your thin-eyed pony. Your Beaujolais. You wouldn't forget about your youngest girl, would you?"

"You are... not... my daughter. You... are going to... get... married." Lee rested his right shoulder on the green silk pillow, shook his hips and spat the words out. His businessman's statement had been shorter and more explicit since he was diagnosed with advanced multiple sclerosis a month before.

"Who told you I am not your daughter?"

Lee murmured.

"Who?"

"Jean... My son Jean."

Lola put both her elbows on the quilt and lowered her face, which she kept in great balance by palms. "Your son's knowing," she pointed out, "but he wasn't all that right. No doubt that I might get married. But I tell you, I am always, always one of the Lees and—"

"Once you get married, you are not my daughter anymore."

"Aren't you my father?"

"You are not my daughter. You are a Parisian chick. You will marry a... a baguette crumb."

The conversation paused. Lola was all smiles when Lee stretched both of his hands out, propping his left body up on his left wrist, then tried to roll himself over and failed again. He was wearing silk pyjamas and a velvet bathrobe, with a children's cotton nightcap on his head; his body trembled all the time. His thin eyes and hairy brow looked exactly the same as his daughter's, even though he was extremely bony and his eyes were much deeper than they used to be.

"People have questioned if I am your daughter since I was young," Lola said, staring at her father. "I don't argue with them because I don't care and I know they don't care." Making fun out of this conversation, she took out a mini sketchbook from the upper pocket of her waistcoat, and placed it on the side of the bed. "I almost never discuss my family with anyone. Especially with those mules. I'd be not so smart if I made a sound." Opening the sketchbook in the middle, she took two red tangerines from the service plate, peeled one of them into slices, left the other on the sketchbook, and smelled the fresh scent of tangerine juice before she tasted it. Lee closed his eyes. He noticed it was a Spanish blood tangerine, just in season, but he seemed uninterested. Lola peeled the other tangerine, ate it without hesitation, and left the skins on the sketchbook. Then, pleasantly, she produced a jar of strawberry jam. She popped the jar open and stopped, seeming to adore the liquid jelly, as if she were not going to eat it. She then dipped a piece of baguette into the jam

and chewed it thoroughly before she swallowed it. She seemed to remember her father at this moment, and glanced at him. "This is my afternoon tea. Would you like some, Dad?" She began to draw lines in her sketchbook. "I won't tell Mom if you have some." She winked at her half-awake father. She then stared at missing part of the strawberry jam, and drew some wavy lines.

"Move it away," said Lee. He opened his eyes again, protesting.

"Why?"

"I am not hungry."

Lola grinned. "I am your daughter. I am as stubborn as you are." she dropped her head, kept the sketchbook on her thighs, and depicted the wavy appearance of strawberry jam by clean, steady lines, "Dad, I'll take them away," she said with a straightforward attitude, "If only you tell me why you won't eat today."

Lee immediately rolled his eyes away. "Impossible," he said.

"Then forgive my bad manners."

"I don't want to talk about it. Not today. Not tomorrow."

"Why not?"

"Because there's no reason. I am not hungry at all."

Lola moved her sketchbook away, tilted her head, and studied the picture. "You told me you wouldn't go fasting," she said. "We talked about this. We had some agreements, didn't we?"

Lee moved his lips, but no words came out.

"What did you say?"

"I did not agree with you."

"You lied."

Lee inserted both of his hands underneath his pillow, and again faced the roof of the bed. "If you are my daughter," he sneered, "why don't you bring me my favorite jade horse?"

"The jade horse... I appreciate that you would like to put it on the table," Lola said, stood up and reached her right hand into the sleeping area.

"Go away," Lee ordered, though not in an uncompromising tone. "Nobody is allowed to touch the jade horse."

“Not anybody?” Lola’s hand had already laid a finger on the edge of the green silk pillow. She cautiously drew it back to her pocket. “How about the former rider of the jade horse?”

Lee answered with a clear snort.

“What did you say?” said Lola.

“Nobody is allowed,” Lee confirmed.

Lola straightened her back, scanning her father with her smiling eyes, thinking.

“I’m not going to take anything from you, Dad,” she begged. “I’d just take a look at the jade horse. I miss the old days so much. I’ve been thinking of the days you, Jean and I cleaned the Chinese antiques and played with them. ‘I am hungry, khan. Can I try some bloody tartar?’ ‘I am afraid not, my Beaujolais. We are in a country where people eat horse.’”

Lee didn’t take his hands out of underneath the pillow. He protected something, securely. “You could ask Marie for things in stock.”

“Mom’s busy,” Lola said, “and I don’t need her help. All I need is to play with the horse again.”

“You can play with whatever else.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You can play with whatever Marie has got.”

“I don’t have connections with them.”

Lee gripped something in his hands with great force. “Nobody is allowed to touch it.”

“What did you say?”

“Nobody is allowed, unfortunately.”

“Ok. How about telling me why you won’t eat today,” Lola asked, “If you still remember our agreements after last time you went fasting.”

In answer, Lee opened his mouth widely and yawned. Lola continued to draw. For the third time, Lee put all his strength on the right shoulder, with a deft action, turned himself to his right, and at once noticed the aroma of sweet olives from the mooncakes. He punched the service plate severely. It hit Lola’s sketchbook. They clattered to the floor and scattered.

“Dad, that's brilliant, that's a smart move,” Lola said. “This was a gift from Uncle Kahlo. He'll be so delighted.” She closed her sketchbook. “It came from somewhere in the world called China.”

“I don't care.” Lee laid his hands back underneath the pillow.

“Exactly. Why should you?” asked Lola. She held the lonesome pencil stub between her index finger and middle finger, played with it, and slipped it into her mouth, as if it were a cigar. Feeling the bitter bark, she put it behind her ear. Then she took out something from the bottom pocket of her waistcoat. It was a weathered wooden box, with a remarkable crack on its lip. “This is the jade horse,” she said, watching Lee out of the corner of her eyes. “This is the one Jean bought you as a gift when you were fifty.”

“Your jade horse is a fake,” Lee snapped and crouched forward in his bed, reaching out his hand. Before he was able to grab the box, Lola lifted it up.

“Probably. I bought it from Uncle Kahlo. He told me it was resold by the son of Uncle Sun. Sun told him it came from Jean. But who knows?”

“Let me see it,” Lee requested in a voice of diminished majesty, leaning against the red velvet headboard and stretching out.

Lola looked at him and replied graciously. “Impossible.”

“Why not?”

“There's no reason at all.”

Lee slowly laid his body back to the sleeping area, opened his mouth, and then gasped from his sobs, violently, with tears in his eyes.

“Dad,” Lola presented the opened box on his belly. “Dad.”

He stared at the jade horse for a while. He pushed the box aside and kept staring it at distance. Then, abruptly, he punched it to the floor. “It's a fake.” He glowered at Lola, and closed his eyes. In the next minute, he hid his face in his spread fingers, through which tears spilled onto the pillow. He began to sob from the back of his throat.

Lola bent to the floor, recollected all debris, like a fairy who has just removed their spells. In the next moment, she sat on the right side of the bed, with her father lying on her chest, and she was embracing him, kissing his grizzled head, and granting a piece of perfect moon cake onto his bony palms.

“Olga... the maid told Maria... that Jean's a goddamned bloodsucker,” cried Lee.

Almost imperceptibly, Lola was agonized, but she calmly lifted his father off her chest, and laid him in the middle of the sleeping area. "What did you just say?" she asked.

Lee stuffed his mouth with the moon cake, and worked his head left and right, still sobbing but less uncontrollably than before. He finished his chewing exercises and seemed to enjoy the rich aftertaste, asking, "is Jean a bloodsucker?"

"Apparently not." Lola fed Lee some water, wiped away the foam from his lips and said, "I am sure he's loving you." She burst into a smile. "Do you know what a bloodsucker is?"

Lee was either too busy or too tired to speak. He stopped weeping, and began to deal with another moon cake. He divided it into two halves, one with a duck's egg yolk, the other without. He gifted the greater half to Lola. "It's one of the French ghosts," he offered a vivacious answer, "with sharp teeth."

Lola's rear was upon something; to better to look at it, she moved her body slightly, then softly touched a small wooden item. She lifted it out and took a lingering look at it before her father got miff and hid it again.

It was a hand-made wooden sword, clean and shiny; it was a gift for his fiftieth birthday, from eighteen-year-old Lola, if she had not mistaken.

"We have two choices," Lola said. "We could stay gloomy until the sunset, or we could go to Monceau Park, and see if the lilies are still blooming. Then we'll come back home. We'll have some beef stew with Mom. You'll have to decide now, Dad."

Lee beamed.

He rode on Lola's back, as if he had been a true warrior, and together they trotted downstairs.