THE GRAVE OF YE LUOTI
Written by Guo Moruo (1892-1978) in 1924
Translated by Ping Zhu

When he was seven year old, Ye Luoti studied at home school. One day he went to the backyard garden and saw his newly wedded sister-in-law standing amidst a bamboo grove with her hands crossed behind her back. The hands of Sister-in-law looked like ivory carvings, her palms like pink roses. She was wearing a gold thimble on her third finger.

Bamboo spouts had grown tall. On the ground, the scattered leaf sheaths were rustling in the warm breeze of spring.

Sister-in-law seemed to appear a bit languid – what was possibly in her mind?

An unknown desire emerged – he yearned to touch the hands of his Sister-in-law, but he did not dare to.

Like a bamboo leaf in the wind, his heart ceaselessly swung in the milky-colored air.

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Every year in spring and autumn the whole family would go to sweep the graves on the mountain. Ye Luoti’s mother and sisters-in-laws, whose bounded feet were so small, suffered a great deal from the rugged mountain road. Whenever there was a slope or a stream, he would offer assistance to the women one by one, so he could hold Sister-in-law’s hand.

When he finally had her hand he clasped it tightly, burying his little thumb in the soft palm of hers.

“Sister-in-law, watch out!”
“Thank you, little brother.”
(Ah, unfortunately, the mountain road was too short!)

Ever since Ye Luoti mille secondary school in the provincial capital at thirteen, he had never enjoyed such moments of happiness.

(Thank God, Sister-in-law had given birth to a son.)

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3 Graving sweeping is a Chinese tradition to show the respect of the ancestors and to build spiritual connection between the live and the dead.
When he returned home during summer vacation, he would take the baby from Sister-in-law, and he never missed to touch her palm with the back of his hand.

It was a fleeting moment of tender feeling, like electricity!

“Sister-in-law, the baby has urinated again.”

“Alas, uncle’s robe is wet again.”

When Sister-in-law offered to wipe clean his clothes with her hands, he would deliberately act in a humble manner, declining her kindness while tightly grasping her hands in his.

Ye Luoti had read quite a lot of stories.

When his cousin was not at home, he would go to Sister-in-law’s room to have a chat with her, and she would ask him to tell her stories in the books.

At first he told her stories in *Aesop’s Fables* and *Arabian Nights*; gradually he told her *Joan Haste, La dame aux Camélias* and *Ivanhoe*. He talked about the intimate love relations between the characters, but Sister-in-law did not blame him.

One day he saw the thimble again when Sister-in-law was doing some needlework.

“Sister-in-law, your thimble is so shinny.”

“I have used it with care for several years. With this one, I have pierced through numerous needle holes.”

“Sister-in-law, are you willing to give the thimble to me?”

“You’re really stupid, what is the use of a thimble for a man?”

“Please give it to me, Sister-in-law.”

Sister-in-law stared at, then lowered her head. “All right, I’ll give it to you –but you have to give me a new one in return.”

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“I heard the sound of your footsteps from afar and I knew you are coming. My heart throbbed so much that I could hardly bear it.”

“Why is your voice so charming? I cannot describe it with words! It is as sweet as sugar cane.”

“I used to be tough in front people, now I am gradually soften up. I blush when I hear people speak of adulterous women.”

“I’m afraid I will call out your name in my dreams.”

“I hate the fact that I had lived a dozen years before you were born!”
“I do not know why, but I always feel like calling out your name.”

Ye Luoti gradually heard these words from Sister-in-law.

Spring, ten years later, amidst the same bamboo grove, in the same garden.

Sister-in-law was pregnant with a third baby; and Ye Luoti had graduated from the secondary school. The light of a full moon illuminated them.

“I wish this time the baby looks like you.”

“How is it possible?”

“There is an old saying that the baby would resemble whatever the mother thinks of.”

“If the baby really looks like me, you will suffer undeserved slander.”

“Oh, people like to think in that way… Why are you so quiet tonight? You are leaving, is there anything you want to tell me?”

“I have nothing to say, but… if you allow me, I just want to…”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to give me your right hand ...”

“What for?”

“I want…kiss ....”

“Ah, it’s impossible! Impossible!”

“You rejected me? You rejected me on such a small favor?”

They remained silent.

“Aren’t you leaving tomorrow?”

“I have to.”

“Why?”

“Exams are around.”

“Ah, are you going to a college?”

“I’m not willing to, but I am under pressure!”

“Whose pressure?”

“Everything in the world, probably. I’m pressing myself too, as if I’m in a famine.”

“It’d be good for you if you go… but … alas… I’m afraid we’ll never meet again.”

“How can it be?”

They were silent again.

Sister-in-law seemed to have something to say, but she held it back.
“What do you have to say? Why don’t you say it if you want to?”

“Well ... I ... I’m...willing to...”

The face and ears of Sister-in-law turned crimson in moonlight. Slowly she gave her right hand to Ye Luoti, who fell on his knees, took the hand and sucked it hard. With her head low and her left hand on his right shoulder, Sister-in-law stood still. Her eyes were closed, so were his. Both of them were trembling; both of them were savoring the exchange of heat; both of them were slightly sweating and helplessly panting. After fifteen minutes, Sister-in-law held Ye Luoti up and embraced his neck tightly. With a quivering voice, she said:

“Ah-ah, I love you more than ever.”

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When Ye Luoti woke up from a sudden choke, the thimble was no longer in his mouth.

He received a letter from his cousin that evening. The letter said that his sister-in-law died in this summer in labor! She was thinking of him in her deathbed; in delirium, she said he had returned home.

After he read the letter, he bought a bottle of brandy. He drank the brandy and caressed the thimble toward the light, with tears running down his face. From time to time he closed his eyes, allowing the tears drop into the glass. Before he finished the bottle of brandy he put the thimble in his mouth and fell asleep in bed.

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As the nurse felt his pulse with her hand, he cried out in semi-consciousness:

“Ah, thank you, Sister-in-law.”

As the nurse put the thermometer under his right armpit with her hand, he cried out again:

“Ah, thank you, Sister-in-law.”

He was hardly sick for two days before Sister-in-law took his life with her hand.

On his death certificate the doctor wrote “acute pneumonia.” However, no one ever knew the real cause of his death, as no autopsy was conducted.