

天涯歌女

The Wandering Songstress

By Xue Shu

1

One winter morning, the cold winds swept imperiously in, gathered in the mouth of the *longtang* and hovered there, then split up, swooshing down the narrow lane.

Even in the harsh air of February, the last month of the year according to the traditional calendar, there were always one or two prosperous households that exuded an air of lively affluence. One in Qingxiang Lane had prospered in the past, but was now in decline, though it had not given up the ghost. The brass rings on the double wooden door, which had not been finished in tung oil in years, thump-thumped with each gust. The cold air squeezed through the crack between the panels, pressing into the courtyard, which local people called the “well of heaven.” In the yard stood a stone well with a paved platform, around the edge of which a ring of frost had formed. There was not a soul in sight. The four folding doors of the drawing room, each carved with an antique design – All Five Sons Pass the Exam, Magpie Alights on a Plum Branch, Blessing of the Eastern Sea, and Longevity to Match the Southern Mountain – were wide open. Finished in glossy “Canton lacquer,” an enormous “eight-immortals” square dining table, so called because it seats two on each side, occupied the middle of the room. Across a bench in the corner lay an “itch-be-gone” back-scratcher made of shiny Xiang bamboo. And on a pedestal desk was placed a pot of paperwhites, which the locals call “water sprites.” Verdant broadleaves poked out of the blue-and-white porcelain pot, with several inconspicuous

bunches of coquettish buds; timid and lovely, they were biding their time before flowering. Behind the desk was a narrow flight of stairs with a wooden banister that led to the bedrooms on the second floor. An antique redwood floor clock that had lost its sheen stood against the wall, its pendulum swinging so steadily from left to right and right to left that it seemed that the most enduring, the most imperishable thing in the world was time.

Winter intruded into this household’s courtyard, and into the drawing room beyond. But rising in bursts out of a side room to the left there was steam, and wiggling through the steam came a small woman with tiny hands and feet, a hempfeather duck that was still struggling for dear life in her left hand and a pot of boiling water in her right. Thump thump thump. With few steps she had reached the edge of the platform around the well, shouting “Leap Zhuo! Bring the foot tub, quick!”

The woman’s name was Rouge. Leap was her man. In gray coveralls with a padded cotton coat, holding a cleaver in his left hand and a wooden tub in red lacquer in his right, he strode through the cloud of hot steam, tossed the tub beside the well with a thud, switched the cleaver to his right hand, and aimed the blade at the duck in Rouge’s hand. The cleaver drew across the creature’s freshly plucked neck, but the blade was too rusty and blunt to make a deep cut, and the blood did not immediately show. Conscious death was coming for it, the duck started to struggle with formidable force, flapping its way out of Rouge’s grasp. The half-dead fowl even had energy to run. With its head dan-

gling from its neck, its body was amazingly agile. It shook its wings open, fluttered from the platform, and lunged towards the drawing room. The man leaped up with the cleaver in hand and pounced.

The dying bird finally remembered it had once been wild, and skilled at flight. Straining every sinew in its body to thrash its wings, it lifted itself off the ground. With the recovery of this lost talent, and out of a desperation to survive, it flew to the table, to the desk, to the bench, leaving a trail of fresh blood in its wake. Yes, it had finally begun to bleed. At last, the exhausted animal, drained of blood, came to rest at Leap's feet, whereupon the dull cleaver fell with the heft of the man's hand on its spindly neck. Its body was separated in an instant from its head, which rolled like a ripe fruit to the side. The headless body lurched gorily ahead on instinct, the last steps the failing bird would ever take. The carcass flopped over, quivered, and finally lay curled up on one of the floor tiles and moved no more.

"Well pickle my old lady's cabbage! Where'd ya think yer gonna run to with yer head arollin' on the ground?" Leap cursed gently.

Who would have thought Leap's voice could be gentle. He spoke with the awkward and proud self-mockery of a man who'd been tricked by his own child. He carried the duck and tossed it into the tub beside the well, and Rouge poured the whole kettle of scalding water onto the bloody mess of the dead thing, sending up another cloud of steam that filled the courtyard with the stench of the slaughtered fowl.

Leap rolled up his sleeves and squatted down. He was about to pluck it when he heard laughter coming from overhead. Both he and Rouge looked up to see a small, sharp face framed by one of the panes of the lattice window on the second floor. The skin was so pale

that it seemed almost transparent, the web of veins in the bridge of the nose clearly discernible. A pair of thin lips was open, and giggles kept rippling out of a wide mouth.

"Frost Fu, you freeloader! What the hey are you laughing at? If it's so damn funny why don't you help? Or are ya saying you mean to go without duck stew?" Hands on hips, chin upraised. Rouge's shrill voice and matriarchal mien showed her dominating role in the household.

The sunlight was strewn in the yard by the chilly wind, one shaft landing on Frost's thin flaxen hair. Leap looked up to see a solitary little face lit with speckles of light. The sparse sunlight wasted no time in falling into his eyes.

He closed his eyes, shutting off the light, turning the world blood red. When he opened them again, hot and acrid tears were streaming. He heard a child-like voice sound overhead, "Leap, you don't look like a blacksmith, you look like a butcher."

Leap looked down and saw the front of his coat all spotted with blood, like abstract drip art.

Rouge shrieked. "Jeez, your coat's all covered in blood! You can't go back to work like this! Hurry up and take it off, I'll wash it for ya."

She was already unbuttoning the man's coat. Leap lifted his hands, sticky with duck down, and let the woman handle him. At a sudden slam overhead, Leap craned his neck up again. The six-pane lattice window was shut once more, and the pale little face had disappeared.

2

Day after day, Frost stayed in her bedroom upstairs, spending all her time with a book. In summer,

she would read downstairs in the yard. Now it was winter, so a brass footstove had appeared by her side. She sat in an old-fashioned wooden armchair, which was far too big for her. Though she was a woman, her body was as small as a prepubescent girl's. Fortunately, there was a thick camelhair comforter over the back of the chair for her to wrap herself up in. Her figure appeared to fill out; the armchair no longer seemed so empty.

Frost mostly read string-bound tomes with yellowed pages printed in vertical columns of traditional characters. No one knew how she'd gotten her hands on those books. She was always reading something new; this month it was *Dream of the Red Chamber*, next month *The Romance of the Western Wing*, now it was *Ghost Stories From P'u Sung-ling's Studio*, open on the camelhair comforter upon her lap. In her dimly lit room, she had to hook her neck down to read, tucking her chin into the small of her chest, almost burying her face in the pages. A lock of her bangs dangled on the tip of her nose.

When she read, her free hand was always busy doing something else. She might nonchalantly wave a cattail fan dig into her tiny ear canals with a silver pick, or shell a handful of roasted melon seeds every few pages. Now she delivered a papershell walnut to her mouth and bit down with her molars until the shell cracked, ripping a tiny hole through the silence of the room. The heat from the footstove had risen to her chest.

Footsteps clattered up the stairs, hasty and fragmented. When they got halfway up, Rouge's shrill voice came rushing from behind: "Quit burning your shells in the footstove, you dead head!"

Frost snickered. The footstove puffed smoke as she threw another half shell in.

"Frosty, lunch is ready!" Rouge called from mid-stair.

Frost finished another two pages, smothered the footstove and walked crookedly downstairs. On the table was a steaming ceramic crockpot, smelling of scallions, ginger, yellow wine, and duck. Lunch had already begun; Rouge was serving Leap a drumstick. Frost snorted disdainfully and sat down at the table.

She cupped her rice bowl and said, icily: "Leap, it's only thanks to you that I can get anything to eat around here!"

Rouge's voice, even shriller, called: "Don't be an ingrate. You thought you were an immortal, without an appetite. Let's see if you can stand abstaining from the food I make."

Frost, who had just deposited a mouthful of rice in her mouth, stopped chewing. She reached her chopsticks into the crockpot and said, "Well well well, where'd the other drumstick fly off to? I guess drumsticks are for the thankful type. I'm an ingrate. I don't deserve to eat."

Then she chuckled simperingly, scrunching up the sharp features of her tiny face. In an even shriller tone, Rouge retorted, "You take your sweet time and expect us to wait for you? I'd be a fool to keep calling you. Next time check the clock and come down on your own!"

Expressionless, Leap was intent on eating. The barbs the sisters were trading didn't affect his appetite in the slightest, but the stewed drumstick was still propped up on the brim of the bowl. He hadn't even touched it. Leap was Rouge's man. Although he wasn't entitled to take his meals in her home as they weren't married yet, he came here every day for lunch, smelling of pig iron. It was but a five-minute walk from the forge.

In the time it took the sisters to wage their war of words, Leap had already finished his rice. Except that the drumstick was still untouched. He pushed his bowl towards Rouge, wiped his mouth with his palm, stood up, and said, “I’m aheadin’ back to work.”

As he walked out, Leap’s lanky silhouette blocked a sunbeam that had been shining obliquely in. Seated facing the yard, Frost was drowning in his shadow. Frost’s eyelids drooped as she looked up at him. Then she chortled once again.

Rouge rolled her eyes. Frost wiped the smile off her face and went on eating. She didn’t explain her mirth, just held it in her heart. In her imagination, she told them, “Leap, you’re a hot water flask; Rouge, you’re a teacup. One tall, the other short, like a pair of slapstick comedians.”

But the idea of it toppled Frost back into the depths of despair. Whenever she poured ridicule upon Rouge’s height, she was reminded of her own, of the cruel fact that she was even shorter than her sister, that she could never make her body tall and slender.

That afternoon, Rouge went back to the grocery store, while Frost went back upstairs to relight her stove and read. In winter, when Frost’s bedroom only saw the sun of a morning, she just let the stove keep fuming all afternoon, surrounding her in a fog of blue vapour.

Frost didn’t have to go to work; polio had left her with a long, thick leg and a short, thin leg. A distance that took ordinary people ten minutes on foot took her more than half an hour. How could she go to work with her legs? Fortunately, Frost’s parents had left the two sisters a decent estate, so their days weren’t too deprived. Sitting in her bedroom reading had somehow become Frost’s daily occupation. She seldom stood and walked, for she knew that only sitting did

she look pretty much the same as other women, only in a chair did she look normal. Once she rose and took a step, she was a completely different woman: limping along and humpbacked, skinny and weak, her figure abnormally small. She needed to crane her neck at things that for most people were at eye level.

Now, Frost sat in her chair reading an old string-bound novel. She moved her thin leg, which was thinner than her arm, near the stove, with the other leg underneath.

Frost’s face was as bloodless as her name. Only bluish veins meandered under the skin, making it look all the more fragile, so delicate you might poke a hole in it with your finger. When there was nobody home and she was in the mood, she would hum an old song she had learned when her parents were still alive.

*To the edge of the sky,
and the end of the sea,
in search of one who knows my song.
A lad strums his strings,
as the little lass sings,
“A single heart, together we belong.”*

As Frost sang, she thought about the lad. That lad who strummed the strings, what kind of man would he be? Apart from her father, the only man she had ever known was Leap. But Leap was a blacksmith, always smelling of pig iron, with filings under his fingernails. How could hands like that play music? But who else could she imagine? Who else could better fit her idea of the lad who strummed the strings? Frost repeated the song again and again.

Leap’s shadow loomed beside her, as snatches of music from a two-string fiddle wrapped around her heart and stuck in her head.



Illustration by Xu Jianfei

The man named Leap belonged to Rouge. That was why every time when Frost sang, *A lad strums his strings, as the little lass sings*, her forehead would sweat with debility. She would sing her heart out, and by the time she finished the second refrain she would feel fatigued. And overwhelmingly guilty. She shouldn't be singing the song, even if there was nobody there to hear. Who could she blame? Should she blame her parents for not giving her a pair of healthy legs? Should she blame Rouge for bringing Leap home? Or

should she blame Leap for getting a free lunch every day in a household of just the two sisters?

From then on, Frost always looked upon him with increasing hostility and spite.

But then Leap just kept his head in his bowl, never glancing at anything besides what he was eating.

3

One day, Leap showed up at Rouge's place on

time, like usual. Rouge had thrown a haphazard lunch together. There were only a few wisps of beaten egg floating in the pickled mustard stalk soup, and not a single strip of meat in the sautéed greens. Leap would not have an opinion one way or the other. He did not have the right to one. Frost, however, had an opinion to share. “Rouge, are you serving us fodder by mistake? Or are you scrimping on groceries to save all the money Mama and Papa left us for your dowry?”

Rouge swallowed the rice soup and retorted, “I have to go to work and cook and clean for you, and all you do stay at home and kick your feet up. What am I, your servant?”

“Just for me?” Frost said, and snickered. “It’s hard enough for me to get even a bite of the meals you cook for someone else.”

Frost looked askance at Leap, who kept his head buried in his bowl, intent on eating as usual, never holding up his end of the conversation, never leaving the table in a rage. Rouge’s eyes opened wide. The rice in the soup seemed to have choked her.

This time it was a while before she recovered, to explode in her shrill voice, “Oh, so I should fawn over you and serve you as I would an ancestor? Let me tell you something: if it weren’t for Mama and Papa’s sake, I’d let you look after yourself!”

“Yes, you mostly do already. I’m not the one you’re looking after,” she said, aiming all her barbs at Leap. But Leap just sat there like a hunk of wood, a hunk of wood that ate. He listened quietly to the sisters fight. Frost’s none-too-subtle insinuations seemed incapable of angering him.

Rouge cut the argument short. She wolfed down her meal and announced she was leaving. “There’s been a delivery of two sacks of dried jujubes in the grocery store. But God knows who spilled the beans,

people are lining up already. I have to get back to work or they’ll nab them to make New Year’s treats – steamed sticky rice cakes and sweet *tangyuan* dumplings.”

Rouge was looking at Leap, facing Leap, speaking only to Leap, as if this home belonged to the two of them. Frost’s expression was stiff, as if a stage drama they’d been performing had ended in unintentional farce. Rouge ladled out hot water, washed her face in the courtyard, and ran out, rubbing “clam oil” – petroleum jelly in a clam shell – onto her face. The panels of the double door squeaked closed, exiling Rouge’s figure from the courtyard. Frost could finally relax. Alright, now she was the only person in the house. Now she could do whatever she wanted. She could talk to herself. She could sing *The Wandering Songstress*.

When Frost had just sung the first line, Leap stepped into the drawing room with a big ceramic bowl in his hand. Frost was shocked. “Don’t you have to go to work?” she asked.

“I... I went to the kitchen for another bowl,” Leap grunted. He put the full bowl in the centre of the table, sat down, and went on eating.

Now it was just the two of them. He bowed his head as he ate his soup, with an oily sheen around his mouth, crushed pearls in his beard. She fixed him with a fierce sidelong stare. After several gulps of soup, he finally noticed that she was sitting there staring, her half bowl of rice getting cold. In Rouge’s absence, he felt that he, as the acting master of the house, had the duty to take care of the problem of Frost’s appetite. “Hurry up and eat or it’s gonna get cold and wreck yer gut.”

It was the most he’d ever said to her. As far as she remembered, four words was his limit, when it came to her.

When Rouge brought him home for the first time, he bent down, looked at Frost, and said hello. From then on, he came over a lot, and stopped greeting her. The only occasion on which he would speak to her was when Rouge asked him to hand Frost something, and he would say “Here!” or “It’s on the table!” That was it. Frost, on the other hand, would call his name when she was in the mood, and say things like: “Hand me the scissors, Leap!” “It’s only thanks to you that I have anything to eat!” and “Now you look like a butcher!”

Today, Leap had spoken to her at unprecedented length. And what’d been said was unusual. Frost couldn’t figure out what was so special about it, but she suddenly felt somehow sorry. She wanted to explain herself, as a way of making an apology. But how? She could say, “Leap, all those things I said about you to Rouge, I wasn’t trying to hurt your feelings. I just wanted to...”

What did she want? She had mocked, ridiculed, and demeaned him, more or less openly, to his face. Any explanation would only add insult to injury. She wouldn’t believe it herself. Frost kept thinking and thinking, but did not say a single thing. The half a bowl of rice in front of her had gone completely cold. Leap buried his face in his bowl and gobbled down his sustenance. When he lifted his head, Frost was still sitting there, dumb. Leap asked, “What’re ya thinkin’ of? The dishes aren’t to your taste? Yer feelin’ unwell?”

Leap was chattier when Rouge was not around. Frost’s eyes reddened. Abruptly, she said, “Leap, you haven’t eaten your fill yet, have you? Let me get you another bowl of rice.”

At which, she stood up, reached out, snatched the empty bowl from his hand, and slowly limped towards the door.

Leap’s eyes filled with unfeigned astonishment. He

looked at Frost as though she was a crooked willow branch swaying out of the drawing room into the yard, bent towards the kitchen. Leap had a sudden realisation: this was Frost, not Rouge. How could I allow Frost to refill my bowl?

Flustered, Leap leaped up and chased after her. Trying to grab the bowl away, he muttered, “I’ll help myself, I’ll help myself.” Frost turned aside, holding the bowl tight. In haste, Leap grabbed at her arm. She felt a burning pain, like an electric shock. Her arm went numb, her grip relaxed, and the bowl tumbled into Leap’s hands.

Without the bowl, Frost could only stand there, watching him filling it with two shiny ladles of wholesome white rice. Next to Leap, Frost really did look like a child, her head only reaching his armpit. He could grab her by the shoulders and lift her off the ground as easily as he would a scarecrow made of straw. If he stretched out an arm and circled her waist, she would be enclosed in his embrace like a sapling.

But, being Leap, he just slowly refilled his bowl, turned and found Frost still standing behind him. He hesitated a second, then walked past her on his way out.

Frost stood there in the kitchen watching the man over in the drawing room. He sat eating at the table, head down. He did not look up at her, wouldn’t even let her fill a bowl for him, refused to say a word to her. But then Rouge was not at home. What else could he say to his woman’s lame little sister?

A draft blew into the yard, swinging one of the panels of the double door open. Feeling it pierce her body, Frost shivered and hobbled over to the stairs. With one heavy step and one light, she struggled to the top. By the time she stepped on the final stair, tears were streaming down her cheeks.

4

Frost seldom cried. What with all the pills, injections, and even two operations, she had already used up all the tears she had been allotted in this lifetime when she was a child. What else on Earth could make her cry? Frost was always painfully ill as a girl, and had lost her parents in her youth. But now here she was, teary-eyed for no reason. Wrapped in her comforter, she realised how ridiculous she was being. If Leap doesn't want to let me serve him rice, just let him be! What is there to feel sad about?

She opened her string-bound book, but the tears kept stumbling into her eyes. Two drops crashed into the page, plop plop, spreading into dark stains on the yellowed paper. A few characters were inundated in the stains, where they bobbed peacefully, sprawled like drowned ants. Frost's vision was blurry, but the inky ants somehow made it into her eyes and said, "I hope you will not despise me on account of my not being one of your kind."

And within the other two tear stains happened to be: "I think about you all the time!" and "Why would I despise you for that?"

Which story of P'u Sung-ling's was this? Frost didn't care anymore. She just closed the book and leaned her chest on a pair of floppy knees. When the fibre of the camelhair caressed her face, she closed her eyes and arched her back like a skinny, startled cat, revealing a strip of firm, white skin around her waist and allowing a draught of cold air to slip in. With one of her cheeks resting on her knee, the lyrics just slipped out.

*To the edge of the sky,
and the end of the sea,*

*in search of one who knows my song.
A lad strums his strings...*

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, softly and evenly. It wasn't Rouge. The footsteps were coming up, closer and closer. The odour of pig iron flowed in waves into Frost's room. First it approached the back of her armchair, then it stagnated around her footstove.

Frost looked up to see Leap towering before her. She gazed at the tall man's chiseled face, which looked longer and gaunter than ever in the shadows of the dim room.

Frost's body floated up. Was she dreaming? Or was she a little girl again? Her father had in countless dreams carried her in his strong arms on the way to or from the hospital, swaying her into a drowsiness. She would rest her cheek on his chest, wrapped in his khaki tunic suit. There was a brass button that used to hook against the corner of her mouth. She would reach out and embrace Papa's neck. Tucked in those arms, she would purse her lips at the smooth round button. By the time the button was wet with her kisses, they would be home.

Then she would shuffle over to the mirror. Looking at her reflection, she would check whether one of her cheeks had turned pink, the one that had rested on her father's chest. What a chest it was, so nice and warm it could hypnotise her, so sturdy and reliable that she could let herself go limp, forgetting about her painful disability.

Frost closed her eyes, and kept them closed. Heavy breaths wafted over, breaths in which she caught a whiff of pickled vegetable soup, spicy and greasy, with the odour of pig iron blending into the warm and humid flow. She felt pressed against her cheek the rough fabric of a working man's coveralls. A cold but-

ton hooked against the corner of her mouth. Without opening her eyes, she reached out her healthy arms to embrace the neck that was pressing down upon her chest.

Carried by a pair of arms, Frost floated to her dusky old wooden bed, where she heard a deeply sonorous voice near her ear. "What was that song you were singing just now? It was beautiful!"

Frost suddenly opened her eyes and saw an azure mist of petals all around. Closing her eyes again, she said, gently, "The Wandering Songstress."

In the late afternoon, when the winter sun was setting in the west and the fire in the brass footstove was dying out, Frost lay in bed, sheltered under a mosquito net with a blue floral design. She saw a spider spitting a long strand of frail silk, along which it soared aloft.

In Frost's covers lingered an unfamiliar warmth, a persistent oily iron smell. She reached her hands into her covers, gently caressing her disabled leg. Perhaps, she thought, her leg had been formed anew, as if forged by a blacksmith's sturdy implements, such that from now on it would be just as strong and beautiful as anyone's. At the thought, a pale flower strove to bloom in her cheek.

Stretching her lame leg out of the covers, she propped up the struggling brown spider with the sole of her lifeless foot. "Why are you so busy, on such a cold day?" she muttered. "Are you like me, you don't feel the cold?"

Half a year later, Leap married into the household. He and Rouge married in Qingxiang Lane.

Later on they had three sons and daughters. Later still, Rouge and Leap's children grew up and had sons and daughters of their own.

The sunlight spilled into the lane, into the courtyard. The gate, which hadn't been refinished in tung

oil in ages, mostly hung half-open, giving passers-by a peek at a shriveled old lady sunning herself on a wicker chair. They would call out, "Hello, Granny Frost!"

And Granny Frost would squint out at whoever it was and then at the people shuttling between the kitchen and the yard. She didn't reply to any of the passers-by, just opened her toothless mouth and softly hummed an indistinct tune.

"What are you humming, Granny Frost?" the fellow would holler. He did not recognize the tune.

But the old man in the courtyard, who might have been trimming a plant or polishing a bicycle, knew. Frost was singing an old song:

*To the edge of the sky,
and the end of the sea,
in search of one who knows my song.
A lad strums his strings,
As the little lass sings:
"A single heart, together we belong."*

Leap would smile, look out towards the lane, and say: "She's singing The Wandering Songstress."

His voice was still deeply sonorous. Black iron dust still lined the creases of his now deeply wrinkled face.

Translated by Darryl Sterk