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## A FAMILY IS BORN FROM A HUSBAND AND A WIFE

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THE YOUNG WOMAN WAS PARADED through town, locked in a rusted metallic cage, clearly made for a different species. Her silky hair covered her face, now hiding the dried bloody streaks that could only come after days of crying.

The crowd around her was silent. They had witnessed similar events before, but they were becoming rarer and rarer with time. Each of them realized that this was not only the last time they would see this young woman, but perhaps the last time they would see a biological Chinese woman.

Though this woman would have never noticed, nearly thirty feet away, hidden in the shadows of a crowd of much taller and older men, ten-year-old Wang Yi could see her perfectly. She was unlike anything he had ever seen, and it left an instant reaction flowing through his body unlike anything he felt before. Despite being only ten years of age, he knew at that moment, that this instant attraction and the woman it came from, would be something he would never see or feel again. He would never forget the way she looked, her hair streaming down like the waterfall painted in his father's favorite scroll, her body, and her chest, ample like the buns he ate every morning, her natural beauty overshadowed in his mind by the pain she was going through. As she was paraded through town and taken away, chained to her cage, somehow, he understood. For the rest of his life he would never forget this sight, this beauty, and he would be forever

haunted by it. There was something about her that seemed to call to him. Though he could not touch her, he instinctively reached forward, wanting to have that fleeting touch, curious about the gentleness of a woman's body.

Suddenly, twenty-four-year-old Wang Yi woke up, hardened in pain, his groin aching for a release. It was not his first time having this dream. It was not the first time that his body screamed for a satisfaction that could never be fulfilled. The hot summer air exacerbated his heavy breathing, adding to the pool of sweat already pouring out of his body. His sudden shift in movement woke up Li Ling, his twenty-four-year-old "wife" of ten months lying in bed next to him. Ling looked around, yawning, surprised to be awoken, before seeing the erection of his partner.

"Here," said Ling, pushing his long hair out of his face and yawning. "Let me take care of that." Shifting his body to the bottom of the bed, he opened his mouth, wrapping it around his partner's erection. Yi, closing his eyes, gasped loudly as he felt Ling's warmth around his groin, slowly relaxing his body and thrusting himself into Ling's mouth, instantly enjoying the familiar state of pleasure; his breath quickened as he thrust his pelvis forward.

In the midst of his pleasure, Yi opened his eyes and began to watch Ling and noticed his naked body. Instantly, reality awoke in his mind, destroying his fantasy. The curved feminine breasts replaced by a flat masculine chest, that "thing" dangling between Ling's legs, triggering flashes of guilt and anger throughout his body. He felt disgust entering his mind as he jerked his body away.

"What did I tell you about sleeping nude in bed with me?" Yi asked angrily, throwing the sheets at Ling's body. "Come on, quickly, cover yourself up!"

"But, it's so...so hot," said Ling, his left hand still holding on to Yi's penis. "Come on, let me take care of you, and then I will get dressed." His bright grin shone through the darkness of the

summer night.

Yi felt disgust and shame rise through his body. This was not how it was supposed to be. This was not how nature meant it. Yi wanted the woman of his dreams, not the “woman” lying beside him. He felt the helplessness and anger flow through him as he spoke coolly, “It’s bad enough that we have to sleep together now that we are married, but can’t you just respect me enough to keep your clothes on. You know how I feel about...about seeing...”

He couldn’t get the words out. “Look, just...”

“I am sorry, I will go get dressed,” said Ling quickly. “Umm... do you want me to finish?” he added, trying to sound cheerful.

“Look, just go put something on. I am tired. I am going back to sleep.” Yi rolled over and pretended to quickly fall asleep. He heard Ling crawl out of bed and heard the shuffling of clothes as Ling got dressed. He knew he had hurt Ling’s feeling; he knew Ling only wanted to comfort him, but he just couldn’t.

Ling was already cooking breakfast when Yi awoke. As he walked out of the bedroom into the kitchen of their simple, modern two-bedroom apartment, he thought about his actions from the night before. He knew he was short with Ling. He knew he needed to figure out a way to apologize to his once best friend and now wife. Instead, he sat quietly, as Ling served him his usual breakfast of millet congee, a few fried eggs, and soy milk, and watched him as he flipped between the pages of his newspaper, careful to appear lost within the text of the pages.

It wasn’t that Ling was ugly by any standard definition. He wasn’t overtly masculine or feminine, and, culturally speaking, he was seen as quite cute. He looked rather young, maintaining a baby face that he kept clean and smooth. Though he wasn’t very muscular, he had no body fat, and he had a stomach that vertically lined up with his chest. In nan-nu terms, he had an airplane field. His hair was long as would be customary for a

person of his assigned gender, and though it didn't make him look more like a woman, it did make it less likely that one would think he was a man. Despite everything that had happened in his life and their life together, Ling still maintained an aura of innocence; a sense of kindness and wholeheartedness that most would have lost by now. It was those qualities that kept Yi straddling between the line of like and dislike. It would have been better if he had a reason for treating Ling so badly.

Yi stared at Ling's face; it had changed so little. He still had that same innocent look. It was this innocence that started their friendship in the first place, that innocence that led to a friendship he wanted to protect. From that first day, when Yi met Ling in elementary school, there was a quality about Ling he didn't want to change. As the boys grew older, and began learning about their respective roles that were chosen for their lives, the desire for protection grew stronger, and Yi ultimately saw it as his responsibility to be a part in the decisions that would affect his friend, and more importantly, protect him from harm.

"You're not listening, are you?"

Yi jumped in his seat, having suddenly heard Ling's voice ring out. "Excuse me?" Yi asked, pretending to be concentrating on his newspaper.

"I want to get the surgery. I want to have my penis removed. I want to have breast implants. I want to become a complete woman," Ling said defiantly.

"No," replied Yi, returning to his morning meal and his newspaper. "Anyway, you are too old. It would never look good. It is better you stay the way you are."

"I can take hormone pills. I can do the exercise. I am already registered as a nan-nu, so why won't you let me become one?" pleaded Ling. "Come on, we both know it's the right thing to do."

"I don't want to talk about this. Can't I just eat my breakfast in peace?"

“I...I just...I just want you to like me. I just want you to be happy. Why won’t you let me make you happy?”

“Look, you do make me happy,” Yi said wearily. He looked at Ling, before gasping out the words slowly. “I have said this before. It’s not you; it’s me.”

“I know you will like me more if I have the right parts. Why won’t you just let me get the surgery?” begged Ling.

“Because I am not going to turn you into some sort of she-male freak, okay?” snapped Yi. He saw the tears form in Ling’s eyes and felt unusually guilty. “Look, I’ve got to get to work; let’s talk about this when I get back.”

Ling nodded, standing there quietly. Not knowing what to do, Yi reluctantly gave Ling a quick hug and awkwardly stroked his hair before he walked out the door.

The city of Xincheng was no longer in the same state of glory as when the People’s Republic of Central China was first born. But as the capital of the Zhongjiang province, it was by far the nicest city in the region. Economic hardships, impacts of global warming, and pollution had taken a toll on the city that was barely thirty years old. Inexperience and fast workmanship followed by lack of upkeep meant most of buildings looked older than they were and had already begun slowly deteriorating. The propaganda billboards decorating the city, promoting its splendor, had withered under time and weather. Dust storms from the north coated the city with fine, ashy sand that was impossible to remove. Some of the poorer residents of the city still collected scraps from the outskirts of town, left over from the ten-year Civil War, to sell for their basic survival. For Yi, however, this being the only city he had ever lived in, there was no finer place on Earth.

Flowing through the middle of Xincheng was the once mighty Yangtze River. Though, between the dams in the west and the pollution, the glory of the river had been destroyed long ago, and today it was a place best avoided. The smell of rotting life

permeated the surrounding riverbeds, while garbage from the west made it a sewer that flowed through the city. Chemicals spills from both past and present gave the water's surface a rainbow gleam that sparkled with poison and oils. The remaining life that somehow managed to survive in the river, the few fish here and there, a couple of water plants, and the build up of algae, looked mutated and feeble.

The city was divided into four districts, based mostly on social status, with the river flowing northwards, from west to east, dividing it in half. Most people stayed in the district they lived in, never interacting with people not from their social class.

Yi lived in the northeast district, Shucheng District, home to the wealthier merchants, educators, and the minor government officials. This was also where most schools were located and was the district with the most personal shopping. Most people in the city were unable to afford to live here and only passed through when necessary.

However, being the top high school, Yi's work was situated close to his childhood home in the Zhengfu District, the southeastern district. The government and financial quarters of the district were located on the other side of the river. The least populated, it was also where the wealthiest, most educated, and the leaders of the city resided, and where the best of the city could be found. While Yi's salary and family wealth paid him enough to live in this district, he had no interest in living so close to his family. Using the excuse that it would make the family look humbler and in touch with the people, something that could be beneficial in the future if he were to run for office, he had persuaded his father to allow him to live in Shucheng.

Towards the west lay the Shenyi District, by far the largest in both size and population, where most of the city resided and worked. It was bigger than the other three districts combined, taking up both sides of the river. Despite its size and population, it was the district that Yi was the least familiar with, and he only went if he had to visit Ling's parents.

The last district, the Shoushu District, was also the smallest and squeezed into the southwestern corner of the city. Considered to be the Forbidden District, it was home to the surgeons, the outcasts of society that played the important role of guaranteeing enough women for the city. Shoushu was also believed to be the most dangerous district, where the least amount of governing happened.

Yi grew up in the Zhengfu District. His Grandfather, Honorable Father of the City, Wang Fuqing, was a great general during the war and had become the first governor of the province. Upon his passing, Yi's father was "elected" to the same position, though he was the only candidate that could be chosen. Yi knew that he was expected to follow in the family footsteps, but politics were of no interest to him. His current job as a teacher, though admirable in society, was not building towards the career his father had destined for him and was one of their many common points of contention.

Under a faded and eroded billboard stating "Save China's Biological Woman. Report all Biological Females to the Department of Female Affairs," Yi waited for the bus. The painted woman on the poster was not as beautiful as the one of his dreams and probably never existed outside the artist's imagination. Yet, Yi still spent countless mornings at the stop wondering what her body felt like, what her voice sounded like, and building a fantasy of the home life he knew he deserved. Upon the bus's arrival, Yi headed to Xincheng #1 High School, beginning the same daily routine he had participated in for the last four years.

Yi was the youngest teacher at Xincheng #1 High School, and though he was a competent teacher, well-liked by his students and peers, he knew that like every other teacher in the school, the position was given to him because of connections over qualifications. However, as Yi was also an alumnus of the school, he usually felt a strong loyalty to the school, as well as a connection to the other students, that differed from the other teachers.

He used this loyalty as justification for many aspects of his life, including not going home after work and dismissing his father's pressure to switch jobs.

Yi taught a course that was a combination of ethics, history, and political ideology. His background, as the son of the governor, meant he was the perfect teacher to mold the future of the country. The parents and students obeyed and admired him for his connections and perceived power. Along with his colleague, Teacher Long, the two teachers ran the Social Political Science department of the school. It was acknowledged by the school as being one of their strongest and flagship programs. Though Long was older by nearly two decades and had been working at the school back when Yi was a student there, Yi had been promoted to head teacher upon being hired, which, once again he understood, was only due to the circumstance of his birth.

By the time the citizens of the PRCC reached high school, their respective sex had been selected by the government, and they had begun to receive their education accordingly. Only citizens who were assigned as being male could receive an education in subjects such as math and science in a high school. Citizens who were assigned as nan-nu were sent to training schools to learn household skills, such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing.

As Xincheng #1 was the best high school in the city, only graduates of schools like Xincheng #1 usually made their way to higher education and good jobs. The students and teachers at Xincheng #1 High School were very law abiding, hard-working, and, most importantly, patriotic, as everyone knew that stepping out of line could lead to expulsion or more severe punishments. The fear of losing this rare opportunity was enough initiative to keep most in line.

Every morning, after greeting the 2-foot by 3-foot photo of Supreme Leader Qin Jiaban (deceased 2157) and the photo of his son Supreme President Qin Jiabao, a slightly smaller photo to show respect, the students gathered in the courtyard for flag

raising and military training. The morning activities concluded with a speech about the bravery of the country's compatriots or a story of a recent or historic success of the nation. The speeches, highly regulated and overly simulated, reminded the students of the importance of loyalty to the nation and placing national ideology before their own. Upon conclusion of the morning activities, the students headed up to their respective classes and the start of the school day.

"Continuing from yesterday, who can tell me about the state of our great nation after the invention of XYTablet?" Yi asked his students as he walked into class, dropping his books upon the front podium. "Anyone?"

"Sir, the status of our great nation was greatly weakened by the XYTablet," replied one student in the front.

"Yes. Western advertising greatly increased the popularity of the XYTablet in China. Some of our ancestors had been confused by ideas of gender superiority. Western countries, with the help of the Mastiff Pharmaceutical Company took advantage of that." He walked around the classroom, slapping his meter stick on the desks of students distracted by other thoughts. "Moving forward, what did our great government do to try to stop the rise of the phenomenon? Yuehan?"

Yuehan jumped as his name was called. "Sir, they warned the people against it."

"Can we go into a little more detail? I would expect more from a renowned businessman's son." Yi couldn't help smirking as the rest of his students snickered.

Yuehan thought for a moment. "Sir, I suppose they did everything they could to warn the people, but the power of the Western Countries was too strong, and our great government could do little about it."

"Yes," said Yi. He paused for dramatic effect before continuing somberly. "Unfortunately, the poison of the Western Countries hurt our great nation." He paused for a moment again,

before continuing. “Despite the work of our great scientists, an antidote could not be found.” He spoke directly to the class, as he usually did when presenting important points. “Much like how the British used opium to bring down the Qing Dynasty almost 300 years ago, the Americans used XYTablet as an attempt to weaken our great nation.”

Looking directly at Yuehan, he continued. “Tell me Yuehan, what did our great government do to solve this problem?”

“Well, they implemented the Gender Balancing legislation,” Yuehan quickly replied.

“Ok, and why did they do that? Anyone?” He looked around the classroom at the blank faces and sighed loudly.

“The problem is, like all people, we have the biological need to breed, and without a proper outlet to release this desire, our people became weak and unruly,” Yi told the class, regurgitating what he had been taught. “In addition, I think it is important that we always remember, each gender has its proper roles in society, and when these roles are not fulfilled, chaos occurs. As men, the stronger gender, we are the heads of our households. We make the decisions that keep our society and families running. But we need women to balance things out. They raise the children, clean the house, and cook everyday basic meals so that men are able to do their jobs. It would be ridiculous to expect a man to do a woman’s job and a woman to do a man’s job.”

“But,” interrupted Yuehan, “aren’t nan-nu originally men? Shouldn’t that mean they can’t do a woman’s job properly?” In the background, some classmates giggled.

“To a certain point, you are correct,” agreed Yi. “That is why the government started training and creating women. Remember, though originally not female, all nan-nu have been fixed and trained so they think and act like traditional Chinese women. They are more or less the same thing.” He smiled, as if trying to reassure his students or prove a point.

“Except, they can’t have children!” interrupted a student in the back of the classroom, giggling. When Yi didn’t immediately

shut him down, the other students joined in, laughing quickly.

“Alright,” chuckled Yi, calming the students down. “You are right. There are some differences. But they are minor. Besides, the government has collected enough eggs to keep our great nation thriving.”

The students were quiet for a moment before Yuehan broke the silence. “But I don’t understand, Teacher, why not import women from other countries?”

“Hmm, can anyone answer Yuehan’s question?” Yi asked the students.

“Our great leaders realized that weakening the blood purity of our great people was just as detrimental to our society and culture,” Daxing replied.

“Excellent. Just as destructive to our nation’s culture and purity was the weakening through influence from Western countries. Food from the United States of America made us fat, religious ideologies from Europe poisoned the culture of our country, and, most detrimental, some of our countrymen chose to mix races and create half-breed mutts, destroying the structure of our society. It was only through gender balancing, the creation of the Women’s Protection Act, and the expulsion of foreigners, race traitors, and cultural traitors that our country could be saved. Unfortunately, as you know, by the time this happened, the damage had already been done.”

“What about the men though?” asked Yuehan.

“I don’t understand the meaning of your question,” Yi replied.

“I mean,” Yuehan thought for a second, “there must be men out there who can still create the X chromosome. Why not use them to repopulate the country?”

“Unfortunately,” sighed Yi, “most of the men unaffected by XYTablet and the semen gathered from those men were destroyed during the Chinese Civil War. If there have been any men still able to create X chromosome sperm, it would be their legal duty to donate to the government but alas, none have done

so since the birth of our great nation, as far as I know.”

The students were quiet, thoughtful for a moment, before Yuehan once again interrupted and asked, “Have you seen an actual woman, Teacher? A biological woman, I mean?”

Yi hesitated for a moment, thinking back to his dream from the middle of the night. “I did once, when I was young.”

The students expressed an interest and curiosity that was rather unusual for the class. Yi could hear them mumble about this information amongst themselves.

“What was she like?”

Yi thought for a moment, afraid of showing any emotion. “Nothing different than what our great gender reassignment doctors create, I suppose,” he said finally.

“Sir, one day, I want to find a real woman, not a nan-nu,” a student in the back said proudly.

The other students snickered around the classroom.

Yi frowned. “That would be impossible. There are simply not any biological females around, and you wouldn’t want to repeat the problems in the past by diluting our culture’s blood purity, would you?”

“Are there any biological women left in the country?” asked Yuehan.

Yi decided the best answer to give was the official one. “Our glorious government rounded up all biological women in this country for their protection. All biological women left in the PRCC currently live in special government facilities where they are well protected and provide the great service of donating their eggs to our glorious nation.

“Do other countries have the gender imbalance of our country?” Jiangwen suddenly interrupted from the back of the room.

“Of course, they do. Why wouldn’t they?” Yi said quickly. He paused, replaying the question in his head. He had never thought about this before.

“Why don’t you think other countries developed nan-nu, like

our great nation?” asked Jiangwen.

“I wouldn’t know that answer. Perhaps it is because other countries lack the intelligence to develop the technological innovations like our glorious nation. But I have no interest in leaving our country to find out.”

“What is outside of our border, Teacher?” asked Jiangwen.

“Wasteland. The great war destroyed much of the outer regions,” Yi said indifferently.

“Aren’t you curious though, Teacher, what it is like to see other places?” Daxing asked.

Yi looked directly to the class and said simply, “Our great leaders already give us so much, and we should all be so grateful. Our government and country are simply the best in the world; there can be no comparison. I don’t see how I could find any other satisfaction elsewhere.”

Yi was sitting in the office grading papers and wrapping up his daily duties when Teacher Long came in. He looked tired and had an interesting expression on his face.

“I heard your lesson today while I was hall monitoring,” he said, putting his papers on to his desk adjacent to Yi. “It was quite impressive—the student interactions, I mean.”

“Thank you. I try my best to teach everything I know to my students,” replied Yi, not looking up from his work.

“I am just curious,” said Long, keeping his voice neutral, “how much of this bullshit we are forced to regurgitate do you actually believe in?”

“What do you mean?” asked Yi slowly and suspiciously. He glanced around quickly to see if anyone else was walking in the halls, listening.

“I mean, all this garbage we teach,” Long said, letting out a heavy sigh. “You don’t believe that Western foreigners purposely introduced XYtablet to weaken our country and start the Civil War? You don’t believe that mixed race children and minorities brought the downfall of the motherland, do you?” He added,

trying to open up a discussion. “I mean, all this stuff about fixing genders, and stuff like that, do you think it’s the right way to go?”

Yi didn’t know what to say. Was this a test of his patriotism? Was this a trap to take away his job? What was happening? He thought for a moment before finally saying, “It is not up to us teachers to think about material and share our opinion. Our great government and the Ministry of Education have created the most righteous and accurate curriculum it can, and we should work our hardest to enforce their beliefs.”

“Spoken like a true governor’s son,” replied Long, his face emotionless.